

PARSHAS BECHUKOSAI

תשפ"ב

The halacha states that before Shevuos, we must read Parshas Bechukosai. Normally, we also read Bamidbar before Shevuos and Naso after Shevuos. This year is an unusual year and (in Eretz Yisroel) we will also be reading Parshas Naso before Shevuos. But the halacha is certainly to read Bechukosai before Shevuos. And even in times when the Chumash was completed only once in three years, they went out of their normally scheduled Torah reading on the Shabbos before Shevuos to read Bechukosai. Why is it so important?

Shevuos is a time every year to make our own kabbolas haTorah – it is not just a day where we commemorate when Klal Yisroel accepted the Torah 3500 years ago. Before we accept the Torah again, we need to understand that our keeping or not keeping the Torah has enormous consequences. The Torah we accept on ourselves is not just a list of recommendations or inspiring ideas. While the Torah is a wondrous system of laws to live by, it is much more than that. We made a bris with Hashem to keep His Torah and be His representatives in this world. This gives us a special status that creates obligations. It brings incredible outpouring of brochos if we keep the bris and it brings great potential for kloloh if we don't keep the bris.

When we see strange and extraordinary things happen to Klal Yisroel – whether for good or for bad – one is tempted to give all kinds of mundane explanations for it. People love to give economic reasons, political reasons, military reasons, etc. For example, many people wonder how the State of Israel has survived and thrived economically these past 74 years despite being surrounded by enemies on its borders and infiltrated by enemies within it? The conventional answer given is that the IDF is one of the most powerful armies in the world. But this army hasn't really won a war since 1967. It's hard to gauge the superiority of an army if it hasn't been tested in 45 years. Russia was said to have the second most powerful army in the world and everyone expected it to just run over Ukraine and conquer it in a matter of days. We see the very opposite has happened. Never believe the propaganda of the government about its own capabilities.

So it is hard to know why unusual things happen even with all the natural explanations given by the so-called experts. They are often completely wrong.

The Rambam, based on this week's parsha, says that when disasters are threatening to come to the Jewish people or to a community, there is a mitzvah from the Torah to cry out to Hashem for help. It is a call for teshuvoh. These disasters don't just happen by chance. Hashem is bringing it to spur us to do teshuvoh. This applies to all kinds of disasters – natural or man-made. Hitler killed 6 million Jews only because Hashem wanted it to happen. We have to understand that everything bad happens because of our aveiros. We need to change.

How many people changed when we were visited by the largest plague in history that ravaged the world two years ago? Instead of stopping their destructive behaviors and changing their lives, people explained it away. It was a lab in Wuhan, etc. But this is cruelty, says the Rambam. Because Hashem sends disasters to motivate us to do teshuvoh. Giving these natural explanations takes away the motivation to do teshuvoh, and Hashem has to bring another disaster to Klal Yisroel. And now, it is coming for two reasons. One, for the aveiros that we failed to do teshuvoh for with the last disaster, and additionally for the aveiroh of treating the last disaster as a random, natural event. This is called dealing with Hashem with 'keri'. And Hashem responds with 'chamas keri'.

The mitzvah of bitachon, as we discussed last week, is to know that Hashem controls everything that happens in the world. Nothing happens just by chance. On Rosh Hashonoh, Hashem gives out judgment on the individual, on the community and on the entire world. As we say in the tefillos on Rosh Hashonoh, there are judgments on each individual and on each community. The Rambam adds that sometimes there is an aveiroh which is pervasive over the entire world and the entire world receives a judgment – like at the time of the mabbul. There has to be introspection when any trouble happens. And when we don't introspect and look for spiritual failings which brought about the tragedy, the result is that even more bad things happen.

I repeated this idea over and over again when the coronavirus hit the globe two years ago. Yet people only tried to understand the virus, conquer it and control it with vaccines, etc., instead of also becoming humbled by it. Whenever the situation seemed to get better, it suddenly got worse again. Why? Because we refuse to get the message Hashem is giving us through this utterly mysterious virus.

More recently, the world is being hit by a global breakdown of the supply chain. Inflation is going up, the price of gas has skyrocketed, and goods are becoming scarce. Basic foods are missing from the shelves in supermarkets. This is coming at a time where there is so much prosperity and enormous amounts of food being produced and stored in the warehouses of world. But people just can't get access to it! When you think about it, it defies any logical explanation.

But people don't want to hear the message Hashem is sending. It's an economic problem. It's the war in Ukraine. It's this crazy madman in the Kremlin, etc. All kinds of natural explanations are again being given for it. The Rambam says you are missing the point. If something is happening in the world, it is because Hashem is using it to wake us up to get us to do teshuvoh. This is the basic message of the tochocho.

We read this parsha with its brochos and klollos before Shevuos. Although there is an entire world out there with so many crazy things going on, it is all happening because there was this one small group of people who made a bris with Hashem at Har Sinai. We are accepting the Torah every year on Shevuos and we have to understand there are serious consequences to keeping or not keeping that bris.

The parsha begins in a very interesting way: **אִם בְּחֻקֵּי תִלְכוּ וְאֶת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ**. It seems to be restating the same idea twice. A simple view of the words would lead a person to think that the Torah is just being poetic. But Rashi, quoting Chazal, teaches us that each phrase has a separate meaning:

אִם בְּחֻקֵּי תִלְכוּ, יכול זה קיום המצות, כשהוא אומר ואת מצותי תשמרו, הרי קיום המצות אמור, הא מה אני מקיים אם בחקותי תלכו, שתהיו עמלים בתורה

The Torah here presents us with two versions of how Jewish society can develop. If we pick the path of ameilus baTorah, it ends with the geuloh shleimoh where there is Beis Hamikdosh and Shechinoh among us. We will go back to the situation and the closeness we had with Hashem like Odom and Chava had in Gan Eden before the sin. But it is a whole process that needs to be completed first. How does that process begin? Only with ameilus baTorah.

The Ramban in this week's parsha explains that initially, the world was created in perfect harmony between all the aspects of the physical world – between man and nature, between man and animal, and

among themselves. Then, all of the sudden, after Odom ate from the tree of knowledge, the whole world was transformed. Not only is Odom personally punished by being made mortal, but the perfect harmony between everything in nature has broken down. Now human beings have to struggle with nature to produce food. There is competition among the animal kingdom for survival. There is tension and conflict between human beings and animals. There is tension between man and woman. Nothing in the world works together in the original harmony that Hashem created.

But at the time of the final geuloh, when we reach back to that level, this original harmony will be restored. How does that process begin? Rashi tells us here, that it is through ameilus baTorah. Torah is the glue that connects us to Hashem.

We know this from the brocho of Ahavoh Rabboh that we say every day before the morning Krias Shma. We daven for the following important things. We say: our forefathers had bitachon in You and You taught them how to lead their lives, so please teach us how to lead our lives. Place in our hearts understanding in order to bring us to ahavas Hashem and yiras Hashem. The greater the understanding of Torah we get, we will have a single heart which will focus on getting closer to Hashem.

The glue that connects us to a single-minded connection to Hashem comes from a deeper understanding of Torah.

So to arrive at the final goal of getting the Shechinoh to dwell among us which brings the harmony and brocho that we want so much, it must begin with 'bechukosai teileichu'.

The Midrash in Bereishis says the four phrases of *tohu vohu choshech* and *tehom* refer to the four goluyos of Bavel, Persia, Greece and Rome/Christianity. The final golus of Edom goes up and up and keeps going! It seems never ending, but then it will suddenly crumble and collapse. Chazal are telling us that when Christianity starts to lose its dominance over the world – as we see today – there will be a ruach Elokim over the water – that inspires us to learn Torah. This will prepare the ground for – *yehi ohr* – the bringing of Moshiach.

The pesukim following *bechukosai teileichu* describe the natural world responding and bringing prosperity and bounty into the world. The more we connect to Hashem through *limud Torah*, the more we make Hashem's presence felt in the world – and this automatically brings plenty and security and harmony. The physical world we live in responds to our mitzvos and aveiros.

We don't have security by fighter jets and tanks of the IDF. The security in this country only comes from us – through Jews learning Torah and bringing Hashem's presence in the land.

The pesukim continue in this vein. But there is a flip-side. Rashi explains that it doesn't say that the klollos will start when people are *mechallel Shabbos* and do various severe aveiros. If Hashem gives us an opportunity to be in relative safety and security with financial

means to sit and learn on an incredible scale, and we don't take that opportunity – the klollos will come.

Rashi says the ameilus baTorah with which we connect with Hashem is specifically Torah Shebaal Peh. This is the Torah which Hashem made a bris with us uniquely. We are not allowed to teach Torah Shebaal Peh to non-Jews. It has the unique capacity to connect the mind of a Jew to Hashem's mind. A Jew's mind has to be preoccupied with Torah in order to do that.

If we have that opportunity to really be immersed in learning and refuse to take it, if you recognize Hashem and you just turn your back on Him, you start to despise those who are taking that opportunity and are learning Torah. You start to hate *chachomim*. This starts the ball of all the klollos rolling and disaster will follow.

It isn't all or nothing. It happens by degrees.

We live in very frightening times. We live in a time where we are experiencing an overwhelming prosperity all over the globe – especially to Klal Yisroel and especially to the community of Shomrei Torah U'mitzvos. The opportunities to learn Torah today were unimaginable even 50 years ago. This is simultaneously a blessing and an opportunity, but it is also a responsibility. Hashem gave this all to us and He expects us to take advantage of it.

These ideas should help us be in the right frame of mind when we reach Shevuos in a few weeks and we stand to be mekabel the Torah again. The midrash says the entire world was created for "Bereishis" – for Klal Yisroel to keep the Torah. The gemara in Shabbos says that Hashem gave us a choice whether we wanted to accept the Torah or not. But if we would have declined Hashem's offer, the world would have reverted to the nothingness and void of before creation. Accepting the Torah is a tremendous privilege of being Hashem's representatives in the world. But it is also a tremendous burden – we carry the existence of the entire universe on our shoulders.

There is another gemara in Shabbos which says you don't undergo a dangerous operation before Shevuos. Why? Because the world is in a state of danger every year at this time. Shevuos doesn't just commemorate an event at Har Sinai that happened 3500 years ago. The certainty of the world's ongoing existence is being questioned and put in doubt every year around Shevuos time – will Klal Yisroel accept the Torah again properly this year on Shevuos? If they don't, the world will lose its reason for existing.

This is why we read Parshas Bechukosai before Shevuos.

Hashem gave our generation a rare, historic opportunity to be immersed in Torah in an unprecedented way. We need to take that opportunity seriously. And when we do, we connect to Hashem in the most intense way imaginable, and we bring Hashem's presence into this world. When that happens, all the brochos and the final geuloh will follow.