

# PARSHAS BECHUKOSAI

תשע"ט

The gemara in Megillah says we must read Parshas Bechukosai before Shavuos. Generally, we also read Parshas Bamidbor before Shavuos and Parshas Naso after Shavuos. This year is an exception and Naso is also read before Shavuos in Eretz Yisroel. But to read Parshas Bechukosai before Shavuos is a takonas Chazal. It means that no matter what your cycle of Torah reading is—even if it means departing from the regularly scheduled parsha as was done in Eretz Yisroel when the minhag was to finish the Torah every three years—you must read Bechukosai before Shavuos.

Why is it so important?

We must realize that kabbolas haTorah means accepting also brochos and kholos. We must realize that there are consequences to keeping or not keeping the Torah. It is not just a good idea to keep the Torah. We have been privileged to be chosen as Hashem's representatives in this world. If we fulfill our mission, we get brochos. If not, we get kholos. Keeping Torah and mitzvos isn't just a very fulfilling and satisfying way of life—which it is. It also has severe consequences.

The pesukim in the beginning of the parsha give us only two options, and it is a stark contrast between extremes. Either bechukosai teileichu—and Chazal explain that it means you toil in the learning of Torah—or bechukosai tim'osu—you despise those who toil in the learning of Torah. There is no middle ground. Why is this?

If a person appreciates that the King of Universe has chosen us and wants a personal connection with each of us through Torah and mitzvos, then naturally, the life of Torah and mitzvos will be the center of our life. It isn't something on the side that you do to pass the time. This is why the posuk only gives two options: either you are walking with Hashem's chukim or you despise them!

What is keri? Rashi explains that it means one's approach to Torah and mitzvos is keri—he doesn't make it the focus of his life. Keri means one is not dedicated to avodas Hashem—one is casual and flippant about Torah and mitzvos.

The Rambam says that it means seeing the world and understanding the world through the lens of natural causation—tevah. Everything that happens is happenstance and random. Natural causation explains everything that happens in this world. The truth is that the world is really run hands-on by Hashem, and He responds to our mitzvos and aveiros. One who does not understand this is violating a serious aveiroh—he thinks that keeping or violating the Torah has no real-world consequences.

The truth is that Hashem uses all the political and economic forces as tools to manipulate the outcome He wants. If you can't understand this, and you think that these forces of nature and human history are real, then there will be consequences. Events might come to wake you up and shake you out of your complacency.

The Rambam in Hilchos Taanis says we have fast days to think and reflect on which actions and behaviors have angered Hashem and have brought these disasters upon us. What if a person decides that the cause of these calamities is just happenstance—keri? The Rambam earlier says it is a mitzvah to cry out to Hashem whenever there is a danger and a threat to our well-being. We are supposed to be motivated by these threats to do teshuvoh. An impending disaster or any real-life problem demands a spiritual response because the problem is coming from Hashem to awaken us to the need to repair

our ways. Tefillah alone won't be adequate—we have to correct the wrong behavior with teshuvoh.

If someone denies all this and says that these problems are just the way the world goes and it has nothing to do with our actions, the Rambam calls this person cruel. Why is it cruel? Because if one doesn't correct the root causes of these tzoros, more will be coming! If you try to convince people that teshuvoh cannot help the situation, the situation will not improve!

We just went through a period of aveilus over the death of Rabbi Akiva's 24,000 talmidim. It was an unbelievable catastrophe to the Jewish people. The world was desolate as a result. Chazal identified the root cause was their lack of middos and their not giving enough kovod to their peers. Chazal never shy away from giving us spiritual reasons for why physical calamities happen. We need to do more than just mourn over the loss. We need to find the root spiritual cause and correct it so it won't happen again.

The Torah expects us to take our religion very seriously. We read Parshas Bechukosai to realize that keeping the Torah has a tremendous impact on what happens to us. We cannot afford to treat things that happen to us casually—as a string of coincidences.

Chazal interpret the pesukim as telling us that the central issue of keeping the Torah and despising the Torah is our attitude to ameilus in Torah.

Taking ameilus seriously gives us brocho, and not being omeil in Torah leads to a neglect of mitzvos and neglecting mitzvos brings people to resent those who are meticulous in the mitzvos and despise those who are omeil in Torah. From there, you try to stop people from doing mitzvos and to go totally off.

There is a deep resentment the masses have against people who take Torah and mitzvos seriously and take limud HaTorah seriously. It makes the mediocre Jew feel jealous and guilty because these people make them feel inadequate.

The emphasis here is on ameilus—hard work—not just learning.

If a person will stop and think about maamad Har Sinai and kabbolas haTorah and take it very seriously, it will impact one's whole outlook on life. You will understand that the ultimate goal of your existence—the reason why you are here—is to develop your neshomo by making a close relationship with Hashem. Only through ameilus in Torah does a person come to appreciate this perspective.

There is an interesting machlokes between the Ran and Rambam. The Ran understands that the mitzvah of limud haTorah is constant. There are heterim to interrupt your learning throughout the day to take care of your physical needs. You work for a living, eat, drink and sleep. But, if you do something unnecessary, then it is an issur of bittul Torah.

The Rambam looks at the mitzvah of Talmud Torah very simply—a little during the day and a little during the night. But on the other hand, the Rambam is very strict. If you have some spare time and you could learn Torah, but you decide to do something else, this is not merely an aveiroh of bittul Torah. It is much worse—it is a demoting of the importance of Torah and making Torah secondary to something else. The punishment is koreis! Dvar Hashem bozoh!

The Mishna in Ovos says if you learn much Torah, there is nothing to be proud of—nothing to brag about. This is what you were created

for! If a person is hired to work nine-to-five, and he shows up to work from nine and leaves at five, does he deserve anything special? He's doing his job! Chazal take it for granted that you will learn as much as you can to fulfil the purpose of your existence. Why would you think to squander such an opportunity and privilege of learning Torah?

The brochos of ameilus baTorah come in stages. There will be material wealth and prosperity and peace and tranquility—no threats and no fears. This is because you are taking the Torah and your commitment to ameilus baTorah seriously. The ultimate climax of this process is to have an intense connection with Hashem in Eretz Yisroel with no distractions and no outside obligations and burdens.

And then there is the opposite.

The Rambam writes that everything that happens to people—individually and communally—is a direct expression of hashgochah from Hashem. But this concept has to be internalized. It requires a serious avodah—rejecting the way the rest of the world look at the world and the way they analyze world events. We live in a world where people have ready natural explanations for everything. And it avoids any conclusion that they have to change their behavior.

This parsha teaches us a very simple reality of Jewish History. The closer we become to Hashem and the more we integrate our awareness of Him and His involvement in our lives, the more brocho we bring into

our lives. We rise above the system of natural cause-and-effect into a system of spiritual-physical cause-and-effect. The more we push Hashem out of our daily consciousness and declare He is detached from our lives, the more He takes brocho out of our lives and we suffer from “accidents” and calamities.

Rashi citing Chazal say the way to bring Hashem into our lives in the most intense way is through ameilus baTorah.

Chazal obligate us to read this parsha before Shavuot where we re-enact our commitment to the learning of Torah by saying naaseh ve'nishmah. The gemara in Shabbos says that the malochim were astonished—who revealed this secret to the Jews—that there is a dimension of limud haTorah that is purely for the sake of learning and getting our minds closer to the mind of Hashem. This is Nishma—beyond just knowing how to perform the mitzvos. All of this is necessary to prepare for Shavuot and make a deep bond with Hashem. There is no better way to prepare for this than by appreciating Lag Ba'omer.

Lag Ba'omer is the day Rabbi Akiva established the yeshiva with a handful of talmidim—Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai among them—to bring Torah back to Klal Yisroel after it was almost totally lost during the days of sefirah. He took the lessons of the death of his 24,000 talmidim, and started to rebuild. We take the Torah and its consequences very, very seriously.