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בס"ד

Parashat Behuqqotai Part I The Blessings and Curses

1. Backdrop

In the standard format of a covenant contracted between a suzerain and his vassal in major areas of the ancient Near East, after the former concluded his stipulations, a section of blessings and curses was attached to provide reinforcement for compliance. A similar format obtains with the G-d-Israel covenant in the Torah.* Doing so made it clear to the Israelites what was transpiring and sharpened their focus on their commitment.

As we previously explained, the laws of *Parashat Behar* concluded the covenant stipulations that began with the Decalogue. The *parasha's* last three verses provided a pithy review of the Decalogue's opening commandments and served as an appropriate conclusion to that lengthy section, closing an envelope. Accordingly, the blessings and curses of *Parashat Behuqqotai* come exactly at the point where they were expected to be, at the conclusion of the stipulations. (The final chapter of Leviticus is a sort of appendix.) The covenant renewal Moses led the Israelites through in the fortieth year in the Plains of Moab as recorded in Deuteronomy has a similar format; upon completion of the lengthy law section that was linked to Moses' recital of the Decalogue in chapter 5 are the blessings and curses in chapter 28.

Since a vassal's breach of stipulations was of much greater concern to a suzerain than was the matter of fulfillment of obligations, the threat of punishment for violations was deemed more important than reward for obedience. Accordingly, the section of curses was invariably longer than that of the blessings. This also is the case in both our *parasha* and in Deuteronomy 28. (The sages' maxim, "The Torah speaks in the language of man," surely goes beyond diction and

locution and includes style and form.) In addition, obedience is not perceived to lend itself to continually increasing levels of fulfillment as transgressions are to escalating stages of violation and severity of chastisement, the format in which the execrations of our *parasha* are arranged.

In any event, Ibn Ezra points out that the significant difference in length between the blessings and curses is more apparent than substantial. It is mostly attributable to the fact that the curses contain many details designed to awe people into submission rather than to their having categories of retribution that do not appear in their opposite form in the blessings.

2. The Blessings (Lev. 26:3-13)

The blessings appear to be articulated in their natural order. Understandably, they begin with the assurance of plentiful food. In verses 4 and 5, one phrase after another poetically highlights the major features of an ongoing, prosperous agriculture. G-d will provide rains in their proper times, the earth will yield its produce and the trees their fruit; the grain threshing will continue until the grape harvest and the latter until the next season's sowing, such that "you shall eat your food to satiety" and "you shall dwell securely in your land." The latter phrase appears to refer to security from hunger, perhaps including security from having to abandon the land because of famine. This concludes the first category of blessing.

The second category is "shalom in the land" (v. 6). "Shalom" has several meanings. Since the blessing of military success is explicit in the succeeding verse, the "shalom" at the beginning of this verse may refer to domestic tranquility within Israel (Ibn Ezra). This would include peace from the scourges of crime,

dissension and civil strife, a characteristic associated with widespread material sufficiency. The blessing in the next clause of this verse, “that you will be able to sleep without disturbance” ensues from such shalom. The third clause of verse 6 speaks of safety from wild animals. Wild animals were then a constant threat and a disturbance of the tranquility in the land, preventing people from “going to sleep without fear” and therefore connected with the previous expression. Agricultural adequacy is of course associated with safety from animals. The verse’s final clause ensures that “the sword shall not pass through your land.” This formulation might refer to the literal meaning of its words, the disturbance of an army passing through the land, not necessarily involving any hostility but greatly impinging on the local population. This was a common occurrence in the ancient world (such as the Egyptian king’s intention in 2 Chronicles 35:20-24; see the Sifra). It may, however, be ensuring against invasion, which would then serve as a transition to the next category of blessings.

Verses 7 and 8, the third category, comprise blessings of outstanding military success against enemies.

After the blessings of food, tranquility and military success comes that of progeny. Its unique importance explains why it is introduced by Hashem’s statement, “I will turn to you” (v. 9), meaning He will look on the nation favorably, followed by, “I will make you fruitful and multiply you, fulfilling My covenant with you.” Despite the fact that all the previous blessings involve G-d looking favorably upon Israel and fulfilling His promises toward them, the blessing of progeny is special, a specific feature of the covenant, and deserves explicit mention. Adults always have children on their minds, they strive and struggle for them, but in the ideal natural order they follow provision of basic sustenance, safety and security.

The following verse (v. 10) depicts overflowing crops: “You shall eat very old [storage] and the old for the new you shall clear out.” At first sight this verse appears out of place; it fits perfectly in the middle of verse 5 and would be an appropriate continuation of the depiction of the grape harvest extending to the sowing season. Indeed, some apply to it the principle אין מקדם ומאחר בתורה (there is no early or late in the Torah) and interpret it as belonging in the first cluster of blessings.

However, on second thought it is clear why it appears exactly where it does. It is a parenthetical note commenting on the blessing of the population proliferation promised in the previous verse. It provides the nation assurance that it need not be concerned that its increased numbers will cause scarcity, but that an abundant food supply will continue to be available. Understanding it so (as parenthetical) also obviates a problem of its interference with the inherent link between the preceding and succeeding verses. Verse 9 concluded with Hashem assuring the Israelites He will maintain His Covenant with them, a pledge that has its most natural continuation in verses 11 and 12.

The final blessing category gets to the high point of the whole covenantal enterprise – G-d promises that He will place His dwelling amid the nation, that He will not loathe them (אֲנִי אֶתְעַלְּךָ נַפְשִׁי אֶתְקַח), that He will “travel” in the nation’s midst and “I shall be your G-d and you shall be My people” (vv. 11-12). In the closing verse of this section (v. 13) He identifies Himself in a manner reminiscent of His opening declaration of the Decalogue, reflecting the role of our passage in covenant format.

Regarding G-d’s statement that He will not loathe Israel (v. 11b), one may wonder: in the midst of such glorious blessings as these, immediately after stating that He will place His dwelling amid the nation, is it not a discordant note to state that He will not loathe them? It cannot mean that He is giving an assurance that He will maintain His favorable relationship with the nation regardless of its behavior. The blessings are predicated on “if you follow my statutes and observe My commands.” Moreover, at a certain point of disobedience, the execrations state that He will do exactly what that phrase (v. 11b) indicates will not happen, וְנִעַלְתָּה נַפְשִׁי אֶתְקַח (“and I [My soul] shall loathe you” [v. 30]).

Ibn Ezra interprets it from the perspective of “the Torah speaks in the language of man.” Man sometimes detests dwelling in the same location for a long period of time, and, we may add, sometimes gets tired and bored of a relationship despite it once having been most pleasing to him, without a clear-cut cause for falling-out. The Deity declares that He will not act in that manner. He assures us that He will be happy to continue the favorable relationship indefinitely if the

nation is cooperative. However, it is hard to accept that we should even consider the possibility of applying to G-d the notion that He might come to detest Israel without proper cause, that it should be necessary for Him to state that He would not do so. Even in a human context one who comes to loathe a covenantal partner without proper cause, merely out of boredom or desire for a different partner, is considered base. We should not interpret G-d as announcing that He would not so behave.

It appears more likely to be stating that G-d's act of placing His dwelling amid the nation would serve to influence the people to appreciate His presence and maintain their commitment to Him; accordingly, it would be less likely that the situation would deteriorate to cause Him to disdain them.

The blessings seem to constitute five categories, corresponding to the five units in the section of curses.

Why did the blessings not include a specific statement about good health, especially since illnesses are included in the curses? Perhaps good health is considered the normal and natural state of living when prosperity, tranquility and security, under G-d's favor, obtain and persist.

3. The Execration (Lev. 26:14-38)

The introduction to the section of curses (vv. 14-15) is lengthier than that to the blessings, containing more "if" clauses and elaborating phrases. In this way the text transmits the feeling that G-d is reluctant to invoke the dire consequences for disobedience and reflects His practice of giving multiple opportunities for repentance.

The overall section comprises a series of five successive units of increasing severity. Each of these contains a general warning that threatens retribution for noncompliance with G-d's laws followed by a declaration of the particular chastisement in store for violation. After each cluster of punishments G-d anticipates Israel's reformation. He is in an ongoing relationship with the nation, ever interested in moving it to fulfillment of His laws. If the nation continues in its resistance He metes out a more intense set of chastisements, culminating in destruction and exile.

Even then, He awaits a national stirring of repentance. We will survey the five categories.

First is a combination of illnesses that will "wear out the eyes [possibly in the sense of longing for and awaiting a cure] and exhaust the breath." These are connected with the frustration that the Israelites will endure in that they will sow their fields but enemies will consume the crops. (In the execrations, a problem with physical sustenance is included at each stage.) "I will set My countenance against you" and you shall be plague-stricken before your enemies, who shall dominate you. "You shall flee when none pursue you" (vv. 16-17).

If this does not result in improvement, in the second round He will punish "sevenfold for your sins." He will "break the pride of your strength and make your skies like iron and your earth like bronze," such that "your power will be exhausted in vain," drastically curtailing productivity (vv. 18-20). The locution "sevenfold for your sins" (or a slight variation thereof) is then employed in each subsequent unit. As seven is the number signifying completion and perfection in the ancient Near East, when used in describing retribution, it means a full measure (see Gen. 4:24; Ps. 79:12; Prov. 6:31).

The third step involves the release of wild animals, which will bereave parents, decimate cattle, diminish the population and cause roads to be deserted (vv. 21-22). Beginning with this set and continuing through the final two, the clause that denotes resisting G-d's will is וְאַם תִּלְכוּ עִמִּי קָרִי, or a slight variation thereof. This is a difficult expression to translate precisely. We will touch on the major opinions.

1. Some render it as "walking with Me inconsistently," interpreting *qeri* as associated with מְקַרְה, "chance happening," in the sense of "occasionally," not committed to fulfilling the covenant in a fixed and consistent manner (*Targum Jonathan*, Sifra, Rashbam).

2. Another school also considers קָרִי connected to מְקַרְה, "chance happening," but understands it as Israel interpreting events as resulting from happenstance, as יְדוֹ נִגְעָה בְּנוֹ מְקַרְה הוּא הָיָה לְנוֹנָם ("It was not His hand that has struck us, it was chance happenings that befell us" [1 Sam. 6:9]),

denying divine providence (Ibn Ezra second opinion, Rambam, *Guide*, 3:36, Radaq).

3. Menahem (cited by Rashi) translates the clause as “walking with Me sparingly,” refraining from being close to Hashem, such as in *הִקַּר רִגְלֶךָ מִבֵּית רֵעֶךָ* (“Refrain your foot from your friends home” [Prov. 25:17]). This interpretation appears to take *קָרַי* as related to *קָרַר*, “rare.”

4. *Targum Onqelos* translates *qeri* as “with stubbornness.” Rabbi D.Z. Hoffmann conjectures that this may be based on seeing *qeri* as a form of *qor*, “cold,” (as in Gen. 8:22), derived from the root *qarar*. Cold raises the image of ice, something solid and hard, thus inflexible and stubborn.

5. In another take on *qeri* being derived from *qor*, “cold,” some see the locution as referring to Israel relating to G-d in a cold manner, without passion, indifferently. In this regard, one may wonder if *הַמַּיִם בְּיַד הַקְּרִי בִּן הַקְּרִי רָעָהָה* (Jer. 6:7) may be rendered, “as the fountain maintains the coolness of its water, so does her evil maintain its chill” (see Mandelkern Concordance, *קרר*, p. 1050).

6. Hoffmann’s personal view is that *קָרַי*, derived from *קָרָה* and as in *לִקְרָאת*, denotes “meet,” “encounter,” thus “being opposite,” therefore “confront” and “adverse.” Hence, the phrase could here be translated, “If you go with Me in a hostile (or rebellious) manner.”

If a fourth set of chastisements is necessary, Hashem will bring upon them “the avenging sword, taking vengeance for the covenant.” The population will be forced into cities, followed by pestilence and being delivered into enemy hands. At this time He will break “the staff of bread” and great hunger will ensue (vv. 23-26). Here, G-d’s response to Israel’s “going with Him *qeri*” is that He also will relate to them *be’qeri*. This mode of response also applies to the fifth and last category, except that there it is *בְּקָרַי*, adding “with fury.” Surely, the interpretation of *qeri* in relation to Hashem should coincide with the meaning as employed in relation to Israel, each school according to its definition. It should be noted that the *qeri* stem is attested seven times in the pericope, four times for Israel and three for Hashem.

Description of the fifth stage (v. 27 ff.) is lengthy and intense. It includes the awesome circumstance of a famine so severe that parents resort to eating their children’s flesh. G-d destroys Israel’s cultic sites, heaping their corpses upon the “corpses” of their idols (in poetic justice, the enemy slays the Israelites upon their always-dead fetishes). G-d spurns them, devastates their cities, desolates their sanctuaries and refuses to savor their offerings. He scatters them among the nations while the sword is unsheathed against them, their land desolate, their cities ruined.

Verses 34-35 assume that if the situation deteriorates to the degree that the depicted punishment comes about, one of the transgressions the Israelites would have been guilty of would be to have refrained from giving the land its rest every seventh year. In an ironic tone these verses relate that, in its prolonged desolation, the land, personified (recalling the land observing the seventh year rest at the beginning of *Parashat Behar*), will receive the “rest” it had been denied during the years that Israel dwelled upon it.

It should be noted, however, that the Torah does not state that violation of the seventh-year statute would be seen as the *cause* of being exiled from the land. Our chapter clearly and consistently speaks of violation of all the laws and of not relating properly to G-d as the cause of the dire punishments. Elsewhere in Scripture, the exile is attributed to the major transgressions of idolatry, abominations and injustice.

Near the end of Chronicles, in discussing the return from the Babylonian exile, an association is made between the seventy years of exile and the land receiving its due years of rest. But the passage does not term the transgression of refraining from giving the land its rest a cause. It states there: “...in fulfillment of the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, until the land paid back its Sabbaths; as long as it lay desolate it kept its Sabbath, till seventy years were completed” (2 Chr. 36:21, NJPS). In the book of Jeremiah, the prophet refers to seventy years of exile (Jer. 25:11-12; 29:10) but does not speak about the Sabbath of the land. It happens to be that seventy years multiplied by seven roughly coincides with the length of time Israel had dwelled on its land as a settled nation before the destruction. In a clearly midrashic manner the sages expounded the connection as cause and effect.

The next verse in the execration speaks of the remnant in exile. Fear will continually plague them. They will flee as from the sword and fall even when there is no pursuer (Lev. 26:36). Verse 37 is the penultimate verse of the actual curses. Confusion will beset the remnant and they will stumble one man over another, again, even when there is no pursuer. The final clause of that verse וְאִתְּכֶם לֹא תִּקְוּם לְפָנַי אֲבִיבֵיכֶם (“And you shall not be able to stand upright before your enemies”) corresponds to, and reverses, the final clause of the blessings וְאֶשְׁבֵּר מַטְתְּ עַלְכֶם וְאֹלְלָהָ אֶתְכֶם

קוֹמְמִיּוֹת (“I broke the bars of your yoke and enabled you to walk upright” [v. 13]).

We will comment on verse 38 and on the verses of consolation that follow in our next study.

Endnote

* See our study *The G-d-Israel Covenant: On Meaning and Format*.

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