

Parshat Bechukotai – May 28, 2022

By Sara Forman

Shabbat shalom

My name is Sara Forman.

I have a confession- today is my first full Drash for the minyan in 26 years of membership. Crazy, right? As chance would have it, it's also my first drash as the mother of a child and future spouse who are celebrating their aufuf. Also crazy, - But who knows, there may be other opportunities soon ahead...So for me, and my family, this seems like a good time to reflect on our blessings, and, today's parasha, Bechukotai, gives me a fortunate opportunity to do that.

Bechukotai is last parsha in Vayikra- a book that focuses on themes of holiness and the Israelites relationship to God individually and as a community. Bechukotai outlines the blessings to be bestowed upon bnei yisrael should they follow God's commandments. It also describes the curses - the tochacha - that will occur should they not live according to the mitzvot and with a commitment to the covenant.

Before diving into a discussion of the blessings and curses directly, I'd like to delve briefly into the very beginning of the parasha:

אם־בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּלְכוּ וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֹתָם: If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments,

וְנָתַתִּי גֶשְׁמִיכֶם בְּעִתָּם וְנָתַתִּי הָאֲרֶזֶץ וְיִבְלֶה וְעַץ הַשָּׂדֶה יִתֵּן פְּרוֹ: I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit.

What hit me first about the parsha is the first word: Im.....**If** you follow my laws **then** I will grant you rains in their season.....

What is the **IF** all about? Why not say **when** you follow my laws **then** I will grant you rain in season....., whereby Hashem assumes that we will follow the rules and ethical code. Why not say- **you must** follow my rules/laws for blessings to occur- but what is said is **IF**. The IF connotes uncertainty. This is again what we see in the curses-

וְאִם־לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת־כָּל־הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments,

וְאִם־בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּמְאָסוּ וְאִם־אֶת־מִשְׁפָּטַי תִּגְעַל בְּפִנְיִיכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי: if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant

One may or may not follow the rules. The message I see being conveyed here is that we as humans have the choice or the agency to decide yes, I will follow the mitzvot and lead an ethical life or no I will not.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z'l states it in the following words -The choice – God is saying – is in your hands. You are free to do what you choose. But actions have consequences. You cannot act selfishly and win the respect of other people. You cannot allow injustices to prevail and sustain a cohesive society. You cannot let rulers use power for their own ends without destroying the basis of a free and gracious social order. There is nothing mystical about these ideas. They are eminently intelligible. But they are also, and inescapably, moral.

The next area I'd like to explore is found in the tochacha- Interestingly in this section we hear a word not heard elsewhere in the Tanach: Keri.

Here's one example:

וְאִם בְּאֵלֶיךָ לֹא תִסָּדֵר לִי וְהִלַּכְתֶּם עִמִּי קְרִי: And if these things fail to discipline you for Me, and you remain Keri hostile to Me,

וְהִלַּכְתִּי אַף־אֵינִי עִמָּכֶם בְּקִרְי וְהִכִּיתִי אֶתְכֶם גַּם־שִׁבְעַ עַל־חַטֹּאתֵיכֶם: I too will remain Keri hostile to you: I in turn will smite you sevenfold for your sins

Keri is mentioned seven times- a significant number - clearly indicating its importance; Keri can be translated in a number of ways:

Koof-Raysh = kar, cold, harsh, hostile- you treat me harshly I will treat you harshly

Or Per Rashi and again Maimonides: Koof Raysh Hay- from the word Mikre -a random occurrence, happening, to occur in an unplanned way or something lacking meaning

Initially one might understand keri as meaning that those who do not follow the Torah's laws or moral code will be treated harshly, but perhaps if we use Maimonides' interpretation, we might understand Keri to mean that those who sometimes approach life doing the right things automatically, without intentionality or earnest connection to the mitzvot, are missing the pathway to a life of blessings – In other words, we can't just move passively through life, without attaching meaning to our actions. The mindfulness with which we approach our commitments to actions – protecting others, working to advance a just society – is as essential as the actions themselves. All the more so in these times of social unrest and disruption.

Again Per Jonathan Sacks: "to be a Jew is to have faith that our individual lives and collective have meaning. Search for meaning, and you will discover strength- life is not a mere change.

In the last part of the tochacha is one final statement that I found quite interesting: despite the curses and Hashem's disappointment at the relationship with B'nei Yisrael, Hashem states that Ha'shem will never abandon bnei yisrael, despite B'Y's shortcomings and inability to follow the mitzvot as prescribed. In other words, God will embrace forgiveness and embrace the commitment, despite the relationship difficulties of Bnei Yisrael and Hashem.

Interestingly Moshe does not mention forgiveness when he repeats a summation of curses to B'nei Yisrael in Devarim (28-15 Ki Tavo). This serves to remind us of the holiness that only God can bestow upon us through forgiveness and that forgiveness is a divine attribute that we can and should strive for - frequently not easy to come by. One's ability to work things out even with those who have wronged them – is a reflection of one's inner divine presence.

Now that we have reflected on the parsha and blessings and curses I'd like to add my own personal reflection on blessings and curses, or as I like to say, blessings and major challenges: It starts here: Many may not know that Sam and Emily have a number of things in common:

They both went to Wash U, both have a love of summer camp. Two of the most important women in Sam's life have the same birthday (me and Emily), Sam loves to eat pizza, Emily's dad has a pizza oven. and while Sam has a Bubbie Roz here in Newton, Emily has a bubie Rose in LA.

I had the pleasure of meeting Bubie in March in LA at a bridal shower for Emily. While visiting with Bubie she shared the following story with me. Rose was born in Poltusk, Poland in the 1920s, and then sadly, when she was a very young girl, her father lost his job as a hat salesman. After tremendous struggles with poverty, Rose's father was able to arrange to go to Toronto to live with a cousin who sponsored him, and ultimately after working for a number of years, he was able to have Rose and the rest of the family join him in Canada- this was in 1931. Bubie Rose said that it felt like such a tragedy to her parents to have had to leave their home and to have struggled with such a challenge- a true curse. But Rose continued... "can you believe it, who would have thought that losing a job could have been the greatest blessing of all?" She understood that her father's losing his work was the ultimate turning point for her family. It saved their lives...Blessings and curses....sometimes they are integrally associated ...sometimes a tremendous curse can actually lead to future blessings.

Going through hard times helps us to appreciate life's blessings mentioned in this parasha: having food from a good harvest and appropriate weather, being with family, raising the next generation, having safety around you, and a safe climate. In the parsha there are fewer blessings compared with the curses (10 vs 29 psukim) . Many of the blessings are simpler- more basic - they are often not appreciated and may be taken for granted.

Which brings me to the thought that sometimes we need curses to truly identify the blessings in our lives.

Unfortunately, there have been many curses in the world lately, COVID, war, climate change, significant mental health challenges for the youth I work with, increasing violence and hatred in the world. I could go on - but I believe one of my favorite modern philosophers, Mr Rodgers, sums it up well: --finding blessings means you have to look for them as if they were sparks of light in the darkness. When things go wrong or something bad happens, he used to say, "look for the helpers, You will always find people who are helping." These are just one aspect of the blessings that surround us: It may take the curses to help us recognize them.

Over the past two years- we have found blessings in being able to gather in person as a community for davening, being able to have a Passover seder with in person guests, being able to see family who live at a distance- to name just a few.

So how do I put this all together and wrap it up in romantic marital advice for the chatan and kalah sitting before us today:

Em and Sam- from today's text, we learn that an element of blessings involve free will and a decision to commit mindfully to one another- that forgiveness should always be part of the equation even in the most difficult of circumstances and that blessings are everywhere. They come in the most simple terms if we just look for them. And at times it takes a challenging situation to reveal to you what are your true blessings.

Sam and Emily , you are true blessings to those around you, to your friends and family, your communities, - the students and patients that you care for. We all wish you many years of good health and happiness

May you always be blessed with a meaningful life together, filled with joy and intentional kindness and embraced with love and song.

Kol sason v' kol simcha, kol chatan vkol kalah