

Parshat Behar - Bechukotai
From Har Sinai to Jerusalem: A Place in Our Hearts
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When is a place not only a place? The two parshiot that we will read this week, Behar and Bechukotai, are often considered one unit, containing additional laws given at Har Sinai. Parshat Behar begins with instructions given to Moshe at Mount Sinai (Vayikra 25:1) and concludes at both the end of chapter 26 and the end of chapter 27 with a reminder that these laws were given on Har Sinai.

The placement of these laws seems strange. Sefer Shemot, which contains the Har Sinai story, the Ten Commandments and the many laws given at that time seems like a more natural location for these instructions. Why place them instead at the end of Sefer Vayikra? Many commentaries raise this question, with the assumption that Har Sinai is a specific place linked to a specific time in our history. However, the name Har Sinai also defines the unique relationship that was created in that time, at that place between God and B'nei Yisrael. It is where God promised:

Now then, if you will obey Me faithfully and keep My covenant, you shall be My treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, all the earth is Mine, but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words that you shall speak to the children of Israel." (Shemot 19: 5-6)

עֲתָה אִם־שָׁמַעוּ תִשְׁמְעוּ בְקוֹלִי וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי וְהִיִּיתֶם לִי סִגְלָה מִכָּל־הָעַמִּים כִּי־לִי כָל־הָאָרֶץ: אַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי מִמְּלַכֶּת כֹּהֲנִים וְגוֹי קָדוֹשׁ אֲלֵה הַדְּבָרִים אֲשֶׁר תִּדְבַּר אֵלַי־בְּנֵי (שְׁמוֹת יט: ה-ו)

and where B'nei Yisrael responded:

All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" (Shemot 19:8)

וַיַּעֲנוּ כָל־הָעָם יַחְדָּו וַיֹּאמְרוּ כָל אֲשֶׁר־דִּבֶּר יְיָ וְנַעֲשֶׂה (שְׁמוֹת יט:ח)

The three chapters in this week's parashot expand and clarify this special relationship. Chapter 25 contains the laws of Shmitta and Yovel, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. In Israel, the farmer can work the land for six years but in the seventh year no agricultural work is permitted. Why?

For the land is Mine; you are but strangers resident with Me. Throughout the land that you hold, you must provide for the redemption of the land. (Vayikra 25: 23-24)

כִּי־לִי הָאָרֶץ כִּי־גֵרִים וְתוֹשָׁבִים אַתֶּם עַמִּדִּי: וּבְכָל אֶרֶץ אַחֲזַתְכֶם גְּאֹלָה תִתְּנוּ לְאֶרֶץ (וַיִּקְרָא כה: כג-כד)

God brought B'nei Yisrael out of Egypt to inherit the Land of Israel but only with the understanding that God is the true owner of the land and we are only caretakers. The obligation to observe the Shmitta year is a regular reminder of this relationship.

In chapter 26 the focus is on another facet of our relationship with God, the covenantal.

If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments (Vayikra 26:3)

אִם־בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאֶת־מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם: (וַיִּקְרָא כו:ג)

If we follow God's laws and walk in His ways, great blessings will be bestowed upon us. If not, we will suffer terrible curses and tragedies, culminating in Exile from the Land of Israel. The chapter ends with a reference back to the original covenant at Sinai.

I will remember in their favor the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations to be their God: I, the LORD (Vayikra 26: 45)

 וְזָכַרְתִּי לָהֶם בְּרִית רְאִשְׁנָיִם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי-אֹתָם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם לְעֵינֵי הַגּוֹיִם לְהִיטֵל לָהֶם לְאֱלֹקִים אֲנִי יְקֹוֹק: (ויקרא כו:מד)

Even when we are exiled because of our sins, our relationship with God is never severed. The original covenant at Sinai survives and allows us to return to God and to Israel.

The final chapter in Sefer Vayikra deals with the consecration of monetary gifts to the Beit Hamikdash, based on the value of a person or property. These are voluntary gifts that an individual chooses to give to express gratitude and appreciation for blessings received. Like the laws of Shmitta, which instill the recognition that the land belongs to God and we are only the caretakers, the laws regarding consecration of property express the recognition that the blessings that a person receives in life are all gifts from God.

The language of the first verse of Bechukotai, which lays out the covenantal relationship between God and B'nei Yisrael, is echoed in Sefer Yechezkel. In chapter 11, in the middle of a prophecy of death, destruction, and exile, the prophet proclaims:

Yet say: Thus said the Lord GOD: I will gather you from the peoples and assemble you out of the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you the Land of Israel...I will give them one heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove the heart of stone from their bodies and give them a heart of flesh, that they may follow My laws and faithfully observe My rules. Then they shall be My people and I will be their God. (Ezekiel 11: 17-20)

 לְכֵן אֶמַר כֹּה-אָמַר אֲדֹנָי יְקֹוֹק וְקִבַּצְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָעַמִּים וְאֶסַּפְתִּי אֶתְכֶם מִן-הָאֲרָצוֹת אֲשֶׁר נִפְצַוְתֶם בָּהֶם וְנִתַּנְתִּי לָכֶם אֶת-אֶדְמַת יִשְׂרָאֵל: ... וְנִתַּנְתִּי לָהֶם לֵב אֶחָד וְרוּחַ חַדְשָׁה אֶתֵּן בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וְהִסְרֵתִי לֵב הָאֲבָן מִבְּשָׂרָם וְנִתַּנְתִּי לָהֶם לֵב בָּשָׂר: לְמַעַן בְּחַקְתִּי יֵלְכוּ וְאֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי יִשְׁמְרוּ וְעִשְׂוּ אֶתֶּם וְהָיִי-לִי לְעָם וְאֲנִי אֶהְיֶה לָהֶם לְאֱלֹקִים: (יחזקאל יא:טז)

Even as the prophet reveals that the people are about to suffer terrible punishments, their relationship with God is not over. The covenant of Sinai remains and eventually God will return His people to the land. Once again we will return to the Torah and we will re-establish that unique relationship with God.

Interestingly, the renewal of the relationship can only take place when we experience “a change of heart”. The hearts that were hardened like stone need to be replaced with human hearts, hearts that understand devotion, faith, love and compassion. The image of stones and hearts was made famous in the song “Hakotel”, written by Yossi Gamzu, immediately after the Israeli army captured the Old City of Jerusalem in June 1967:

There are people with a heart of stone

 There are stones with a human heart

 יש אנשים עם לב של אבן

 יש אבנים עם לב אדם

He writes that he saw in the eyes of the soldiers both the jubilation of the victory and the sadness of the loss of their friends who would not be there to join in the celebrations. This week we will celebrate Yom Yerushalayim, the reunification of Jerusalem on the 28th day of Iyar in 1967. Undoubtedly, “Hakotel” will be played during the commemoration ceremonies. We will remember the prophecy of Yechezkel that God promised to return us to Jerusalem and to renew that relationship that was created at Sinai. We must also remember to examine our hearts and to know that the experience of Sinai can be with us wherever we are.



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