

Behar–Bechutkotai D’Var Torah

Shabbat Eve, May 8, 2026

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Thank you, Rabbi Stoller, for giving our team a Shabbat that corresponds with a troublesome double Torah portion Behar–Bechutkotai, the final chapters of *Leviticus*. Truth be told, Rabbi Stoller did offer to deliver tonight’s D’Var Torah, but we figured that if we were going to do this thing, we might as well jump in headfirst.

These two parshiot cover a lot of territory that may have been relevant to the ancient Hebrews, but that—at first blush, and maybe at second blush and at third blush—appear to have little meaning for us.

In Parashat Behar, God instructs Moses to tell the Israelites to allow the land to rest every seventh year and to observe a jubilee year after 49 years. The instructions include rules about their ownership of slaves, which is clearly permitted—how odd after the Hebrews themselves had just been freed from slavery. The Hebrews are further instructed to not make idols; to observe Shabbat; and to venerate the sanctuary.

Parashat Bechutkotai, and *Leviticus* itself, end with a detailed and somewhat confusing discussion of vows and gifts to the sanctuary.

I want to focus on 43 verses of Bechutkotai that are known as the “blessings and curses.” In those 43 verses, God tells the Israelites how they will benefit and prosper if they observe God’s commandments, and how they will suffer if they don’t. The nature of the blessings, including agricultural abundance, peace, and prosperity, remain relevant to us. In the weekday Amidah, and to a lesser extent on Shabbat, we ask God to bestow many of those blessings upon us.

Oh, but the curses! After 11 verses relating to blessings, we get 30 relating to curses. Some are, quite logically, the antitheses of the blessings, but they go further. They build to a crescendo, as God makes greater and greater threats if the Hebrews further refuse to obey God’s commandments. Some of them should not even be recited in the presence of children. Finally, in the last two verses of “blessings and curses,” God states that even in the worst case, God will not reject the Hebrews, but God will remember God’s covenant.

What are we to make of the curses? Unfortunately, as you know, a number of fundamentalist leaders from various faiths have referred to the language in Bechutkotai, and to similar language in other parts of Torah and the Christian Bible, to explain why various natural and manmade disasters have occurred. According to covenant theology, God grants blessings upon nations that observe the commandments, and God imposes curses upon nations that don’t. Believers in covenant theology have proclaimed that various human sins were the causes of Hurricane Katrina, an earthquake in Haiti, a tsunami that affected Japan, Hurricane Irma, the Los Angeles wildfires, Australian brushfires, 9/11, and even the Holocaust. Sadly, even some fringe Jewish thinkers are among those who have spoken that way.

Should we even spend time on the “blessings and curses?” A strong case can be made against doing so. In fact, this year, in TBE’s own Torah Study, we are studying *Pirke Avot, The Sayings of the Fathers*, instead of studying several parshiot in *Leviticus*.

Many of our fellow Jews believe that the Torah is perfect, because they believe it comes from God. I suppose that such believers would not question whether the “blessings and curses” merit our attention. Reform Judaism gives me the liberty to choose to believe that the Torah was written thousands of years ago by certain men for certain reasons. I see it as a text that unites Jews to a great extent and as an extremely valuable resource for thought, discussion, and guidance regarding a wide variety of important topics, both religious and secular.

Is there *anything* in the “blessings and curses” that *is* of value for people who regard Torah in the way that I do? I think there is. If we think of these verses in more general terms and if we think of them as descriptive, not prescriptive, we can make some sense of them. We know that if we observe many commandments set forth in Torah or derived from Torah that the world *will* be a better place.

Just consider what would happen if more individuals and institutions followed commandments like these:

“Justice, justice shall you pursue that you may thrive and occupy the land that the Eternal, your God, is giving you,” as set forth in *Deuteronomy*, Chapter 16, verse 20.

“Welcome the stranger,” stated 36 times in various ways in the Torah.

“You shall not defraud your fellow.” *Leviticus*, Chapter 19, verse 14.

“You shall not insult the deaf or place a stumbling block before the blind.” *Leviticus*, Chapter 19, verse 15.

Finally, we are all familiar with what Hillel said when asked to set forth the Torah while standing on one leg, “What is hateful to you, do not do to others. That is the Torah. The rest is commentary. Now go and learn.”

Will we be singled out for punishment if we fail to obey those and other commandments? Maybe not. We all know that bad things happen to good people and that corrupt individuals often succeed in their scheming.

But, of one thing we can be certain: If more of us were to follow many of the commandments in Torah, the world *will* be a better place.

Shabbat Shalom.