

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Parsha Behukotai

The book of Vayikra closes with a harsh and troubling parsha, Parshat Behukotai. G-d's attribute of strict justice is graphically portrayed in all of its terrible glory. We have seen it expressed in Bereishit at Sodom and Gomorrah, and in Shemot with the destruction of Egyptian Empire. But it is different here, because now G-d is talking to us. It is a prophecy of what will befall the Jewish People if they stray from the path of the Torah. There is no need to quote the frightening details. We are all too familiar with suffering of our people both past and present.

The knee-jerk reaction to this Parsha is to assume that G-d is attempting to frighten us into submission. Observe the values and mitzvot of the Torah or else. This is a popular misconception based on a superficial reading of the text and a myopic view of reality. Judging by the world in which we live, G-d desires no such thing. If G-d wished to be a totalitarian dictator, He could probably do a better job of it. Obviously, G-d is no more interested in rule by terror than He is in rote lip service. So why the threat of punishment? Why is G-d insulting us with threats? Doesn't He want us to be motivated by love rather than by fear?

In short: How are we to reconcile the severe warnings of our parsha with our belief in a loving G-d? Or, better said, how do we reconcile the G-d of Justice with the G-d of Compassion? Is G-d moody?

The answer involves nothing less than changing our perception of G-d. We relate to G-d in several different ways, but the most basic is this: "You are the children of G-d your Lord" (Devarim 14:1). We are His children and He is our father. And like any father, love and judgment often come hand in hand. "Just as a man might chastise his child, so G-d your Lord chastises you" (Devarim 8:5). Parental discipline is driven by a concern for the child's development and (hopefully) not by a pathological need to instill fear. Heavenly discipline is no different. In the words of Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzatto (1707-1746): "Divine Judgment and Law have their source in G-d's love. He does not act as an enemy with a desire for revenge, but rather as a father who disciplines his son for his own good" (The Way of God 2:8:1).

Divine Justice truly does flow from Divine Love, for it is never mere punishment for misdeeds. By judging man, G-d cures, purifies and elevates our hearts. Call it tough love, if you will, but people who have suffered can often look back and appreciate how they have grown from their experiences.



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This special treatment is the natural result of a special relationship. Long ago at Mt. Sinai, our people forged a unique relationship with G-d called a brit (covenant). This is not a casual friendship or even a love of convenience. Such relationships are unfulfilling and usually don't last very long. The brit is an eternal bond defined by commitment and responsibility. And, as in any serious relationship, there are certain expectations.

The warnings of our Parsha are not there to frighten us. Rather, they demonstrate the depth of our relationship with G-d. The covenant empowers us. It imbues our every act and decision in life with spiritual significance. It is easy to underestimate ourselves and to think that nothing we do really matters. G-d's attribute of Justice informs us how important, and, yes, exalted, we really are. We are a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. The choices we make in life have very real spiritual ramifications. This should inspire, not frighten.

It is true, of course, that when we suffer the consequences of our "mistakes", G-d feels our pain. However, that cannot be compared to the hurt that G-d feels when we turn our back on Him and ignore the covenant. Rabbi Chaim Volozhiner (1749-1821) illustrates this concept with a moving parable: "The situation can be likened to a dear youth who, in a drunken stupor, takes a bad fall, breaking his bones and putting himself in critical condition. [Being unconscious,] he doesn't feel his own mortal danger. His father, however, is terribly distraught. When the doctors treat the boy with strong medications and bandage his wounds, he screams from the pain of the treatment. Although his father is obviously suffering with him, the current pain cannot at all be compared to the original pain and distress that the father experienced at the time of the fall. At that time, he almost gave up hope on his son's chances for survival" (Nefesh HaChaim 2:12).

The book of Vayikra shows us the spiritual heights we can reach as members of the Torah Nation. We can serve G-d in the Temple and we can create a utopian society in the Land of Israel. We can be holy. But the book ends with an important message. Being connected to the Divine does have its privileges, but it comes with responsibilities as well. G-d is not interested in a commitment-free, casual relationship. We are bound by a covenant that demands nothing less than love and service of G-d with all our heart and soul. There is no greater source of inspiration than the recognition of this eternal truth.

Shabbat Shalom!

