

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Behar Bechukotai
May 2026 / Iyar 5786

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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Behar Bechukotai – Sometimes we just don't know why

This week we read the double Parasha of Behar Bechukotai which concludes sefer Vayikra. At the end of the Parasha, we learn the mitzva of taking maaser from one's animals (tithing). Every tenth animal was sanctified and brought to the Bet Hamikdash as an offering. Part of the maaser animal was offered up on the mizbeach and the rest was eaten by the owner. Let's take a closer look at this mitzvah.

Reuven the farmer was about to perform the annual tithing of his herds and flocks. He took all of his animals that were born that season and enclosed them in a pen with a narrow opening. The animals were allowed to leave one by one. Reuven took a stick with red paint on it and he counted the animals as they left. In accordance with the halacha, every tenth animal was automatically sanctified and Reuven would mark it with identifying paint. But Reuven noticed that some of the maaser animals were not the best of the bunch. One was very small and scrawny, and another one had a deformed leg and walked with a limp. Reuven was genuinely upset about this. He took his avodat Hashem very seriously and he wanted to dedicate the nicest possible animals to Hashem. So he switched two of the maaser animals with another two animals which he considered to be the best two animals that he could find.

Though Reuven had good intentions, he acted incorrectly. With other types of offerings, it is praiseworthy to choose the best animal. But the choice of which animals are to be maaser must be left to chance. The tenth animal to exit from the pen is holy, even if it has a disqualifying blemish which means that it cannot be brought as a sacrifice. (A blemished maaser animal is still holy and it can only be used for eating. It cannot be used for work and it is forbidden to shear it.) As the Torah teaches in our Parasha:

Any tithe of cattle or flock, all that pass under the staff, the tenth one shall be holy to Hashem. He shall not distinguish between good and bad, nor shall he offer a substitute for it. And if he does replace it, then both that one and its replacement are holy. It cannot be redeemed.
(Vayikra 27: 32-33)

It is not up to Reuven to decide which animal he wants to bring as maaser. He just has to follow the Torah's instructions. Because Hashem said so.

A similar issue arises in relation to the ketoret – the incense that was offered daily in the Bet Hamikdash. The incense was manufactured from a blend of different ingredients according to a strict recipe. The process is described in the portions that are recited each morning before Shacharit.¹ After listing the ingredients and describing the manufacturing process, the Baraita² warns us not to add honey. Bar Kappara taught that if one would add a kortov³ of honey to the mixture, the resultant smell would be irresistible. So why not add some honey? It sounds like a good idea! However, the Baraita continues:

And why don't we add honey to the mixture? Because the Torah teaches us: "For you shall not cause to go up in smoke any leavening or any honey, as a fire offering to Hashem".
(Vayikra 2:11)

¹ See pages 34-38 of the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur. These portions are taken from Masechet Kreitot 7a and Yerushalmi Yoma 4:5.

² A Baraita is a teaching from the Mishnaic sages, similar to a Mishnah.

³ A Biblical measure equal to approximately 5-10mL or (less than 1/3 of a US fl. oz).

The Torah has already told us clearly that it is forbidden to add honey. So why does the Baraita first tell us that adding honey would make the smell irresistible and then tell us that we cannot do so? Perhaps this is to emphasise this important lesson – it is not up to us to decide what is ‘good’ and what is ‘bad’. The only relevant question for us is: What does Hashem want”. Sometimes, things just don’t seem to make sense, but we need to do what we are told simply because Hashem said so.

After the sin of the golden calf, when Hashem agreed to forgive Bnei Yisrael, Moshe realised that this was a special time of Divine favour. Moshe took the opportunity to ask for some pretty big requests on behalf of Bnei Yisrael. He asked for Hashem’s Shechinah to accompany Bnei Yisrael rather than just an angel; he asked that Hashem’s Shechinah not rest on the other nations of the world; and he asked to understand how Hashem runs the world, and in particular why bad things happen to good people and why the wicked often prosper. Certainly, Moshe was not just curious – he wanted to understand Hashem’s ways so that he could teach them to Bnei Yisrael. Hashem granted Moshe the first two requests, but he did not agree to the third request. Hashem only agreed to give Moshe a glimpse of His ‘back’, but not His ‘face’: “You will not be able to see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.”⁴ This very esoteric passage is explained to mean that in this world human beings cannot possibly gain a complete understanding of how Hashem runs the world. Sometimes, we need to just accept and not necessarily understand why.⁵ Only in the World to Come, when we can look back at the broader picture, will it all become clear.

A man once approached his Rabbi plagued with doubt.⁶ He had come across a difficult Torah question and he could not find an answer. He was so troubled by this difficulty that he was ready to throw in the towel and walk away from a life of Torah and Mitzvot. He presented his problem to the Rabbi and asked for advice. The Rabbi referred the man to an obscure Tosefot⁷ in an apparently random masechet of the Gemara. The man raced to the Gemara and eagerly turned to the right page, excited to finally find an answer to the question that was troubling him. But he was disappointed. He went back to the Rabbi and complained. “Did you check the Tosefot that I suggested?” asked the Rabbi. “Yes I did, but it didn’t help me. It had nothing to with the issue that is troubling me. And not only that, Tosefot asked a really good question and then just left it unanswered!” “And what came next on the Daf?” asked the Rabbi. “Just another Tosefot that dealt with another issue!” “You see”, said the Rabbi, “Tosefot asked a really good question and he could not find an answer. But he did not give up. He just kept going, asking other questions, and writing more commentary on the Gemara. Just because we have a question that we cannot answer, it does not mean that we have to give up our emunah. There are some things that we just can’t understand. We just have to accept them, and continue learning Torah and keeping the mitzvot regardless.

There are many things in Hashem’s laws and the way that He runs the world that may not make sense to us from our very limited finite perspective. Sometimes our great commentators come up with fascinating insights and brilliant explanations. And sometimes they do not. We can live with unanswered questions. We must follow Hashem’s laws primarily and ultimately because Hashem said so. And look forward to geula with even more fervour as a time when all will ultimately be revealed.

Let’s try something this week:

If there is something that does not make sense to you, or is bothering you, try to work it out or speak to a Rav. But if it still doesn’t make sense, accept this as part of Hashem’s plan. Remember that Hashem is in charge and He understands everything. And pray for the geula as a time of ultimate revelation.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁴ Parashat Ki Tisa, Shmot 33:20.

⁵ The Gemara presents another view (according to R’ Yose), that Hashem actually did agree to Moshe’s third request as well. But the Ramban explains (in the introduction to his commentary on Iyov) that even according to that view, Hashem only gave Moshe a partial answer to his question.

⁶ I was told that this is a true story, but I do not remember the source or the name of the Rabbi.

⁷ The Tosefot commentary appears on the outside margin of the pages of the Gemara.