

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Bechukotai (Vayikra 26:3-27:34)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Bechukotai – The blessings and the curses

In this week's Parasha of Bechukotai, the last Parasha of the book of Vayikra, we read about the blessings that the Jewish people will receive for following the path of the Torah. This is followed by a very long list of terrible curses that will occur if we fail to follow the path of the Torah. Unfortunately, as we have seen, these curses have all come true during the history of our people.

Let's see what lessons we can learn from this list of blessings and curses.

Why aren't the blessings enough?

Hashem promises us that if we stay on the right path, we will have enough food to satisfy us, we will live in peace and security, we will be fruitful and Hashem's presence will dwell among us. One might presume that these blessings would be enough of an incentive to convince us to behave correctly. Why do we also need a long list of curses to provide us with extra incentive? Why does Hashem need to give us the stick as well as the carrot?

Perhaps the curses are also included in this week's Parasha because the blessings are insufficient incentive for us to stay on track. It is human nature to take things for granted. When things are going well, we are grateful at first. However, after a period of time, we often start to acclimatise to our blessings and fail to appreciate them. We see this phenomenon whenever we acquire something, such as a new car. At the beginning, we may derive a lot of pleasure from our new acquisition¹. However, this pleasure usually diminishes over time and before too long our focus starts to shift to our next acquisition.

One antidote to this phenomenon is for us to work on staying grateful for our blessings. The following suggests a way in which we might be able to achieve this.²

There are many detailed laws about the brachot that we are required to say on food. For instance, there are different brachot for different categories of food. It is not always clear into which category a given food will fall. For example, some types of berries require the bracha for fruit; other types of berries require the bracha for vegetables. In some cases, the intention of the person that planted the seed determines the correct bracha. There are detailed laws to cover the correct order of saying the different brachot. Even within categories there is a priority order in which to recite the brachot. For example, we favour the seven types of fruit for which the land of Israel is blessed. Combinations of food add a whole level of complexity to the recitation of brachot. What is the correct bracha on chocolate coated nuts? What about cholent? Mastering the intricate nature of these halachot can take a lot of time and effort and learning.³

One might wonder why there are so many details. Why can't we just have one bracha (such as Shehakol)? Why can't we just say 'thank you Hashem' and then eat!

Perhaps the level of detail forces us to pause before we eat and provides us with an opportunity to think very carefully about what we are eating, where it comes from and how it was produced. Instead of just

¹ As they say, if someone opens the car door for his wife, it usually means that the car is new...or his wife is new.

² The following is based on an idea heard from Rabbi Guy Avihod, Rav Bet Midrash of Shaf Yativ, Jerusalem.

³ For those interested in learning this important and practical area of halacha, I highly recommend the course run by Yeshivat Iyun Halacha. See here for more details: <https://www.iyunhalacha.org/course/hilchos-brachos/>

gobbling down our food without thinking, this process fosters appreciation and gratitude for our food. This may reduce the likelihood of us taking our food – one of our natural blessings – for granted.

As an aside, stopping to think before we eat also ties it in with mindfulness, which is a relatively modern psychological theory about living fully in the present moment (instead of worrying about the past or the future). The mindfulness approach can assist with mental health issues including overcoming depression. Not surprisingly, the Torah knew about this idea thousands of years ago!

A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down

Each Shabbat the Parasha is divided into seven aliyot (people who are called up to the Torah reading). If we look at the size of the portions in this week's Parsha we will notice a surprising disparity. The first aliya (Cohen) is only three verses long and the second aliya (Levy) is only four verses long. The third aliya (Shlishi) is 37 verses long. Why is the third aliya this week so much longer than the first two portions? The third aliya is the portion that contains the long list of curses. The Rabbis deliberately set the length of the aliyot to ensure that this portion starts and ends on a positive note. Thus, before the curses are read, there are four positive verses to act as a prelude. After the curses are read, we read a few extra verses with a more positive message.

We can learn a lesson from this. If we need to give someone rebuke, we can strive to bracket that message with something positive. Nobody likes to swallow bitter medicine, but if there is something a little sweet with that medicine, it becomes more palatable. Following this approach can make it easier for the person to give over the message and can also make it more likely for the message to be well received by the recipient.

The power of the community

One of the blessings included in this week's Parsha is Hashem's promise to us that we will defeat our enemies:

"Five of you will pursue a hundred, and a hundred of you will pursue ten thousand, and your enemies will fall by the sword before you." (Vayikra 26:8)

Rashi points out that mathematically this blessing does not add up. If 5 of us can pursue 100 people, that means that each of us can pursue 20 people. Based on this ratio, one would presume that 100 people should be able to defeat 2,000 enemies, not 10,000 people as the pasuk says. Rashi explains this apparent inconsistency by teaching that one cannot compare a small group that fulfils the Torah to a larger group that fulfils the Torah. The more people that are involved, the greater the overall effect. We see this principle with davening in a minyan – the prayers of ten men together are much more powerful than simply the sum of ten individuals.

In any venture, no matter what you can achieve by yourself, you can achieve more if you have the help of others. And as more people participate, the effect becomes magnified, and the results become exponentially greater.

Each of us can serve as powerful allies and help each other as a group to achieve more growth, Torah learning and spirituality than we can achieve on our own.

Let's try something this week:

1. Take an extra moment before eating and try to have some extra kavana (focus) to say the appropriate bracha clearly. Concentrate on how blessed we are to have food and remember Who gave it to us, before putting the food into our mouth.
2. If we are required to convey a negative message, remember to begin and end with something sweet.
3. Keep in mind the power of numbers. Try to join (or start) a group, for learning, davening or chesed. Realise that every person that you come across can be a powerful ally and help you to achieve exponentially more than you can by yourself or in a small group.

Chazak, chazak venitchazek!

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder