



# BEHAR- BEHUKOTAI

Shalhevet Learning  
Program



## Behar

א. וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי לֵאמֹר:

Rabbi Steinsaltz

**The Lord spoke to Moses at Mount Sinai** before the Israelites set out for the Land of Israel, despite the fact that the following halakhot would be practiced only when they reached their land, **:saying**

Rashi:

AND THE LORD SPOKE UNTO MOSES] ON THE MOUNT SINAI – What has the matter of the Sabbatical] בהר סיני year to do with Mount Sinai that Scripture felt compelled to expressly state where it was commanded? Were not all commandments given on Sinai? But this statement is intended to suggest the following comparison: How is it in the case of the law of Shemittah? Its general rules, [its specific prescriptions] and minute details were ordained on Mount Sinai! So, also, were all commandments with their general rules and their minute details ordained on Mount Sinai. Thus is taught in Torath Cohanim (Sifra, Behar, Section 1 1). It seems to me that the following is the explanation of this: Since we do not find in Deuteronomy that the law concerning “the rest of the soil in the Sabbatical year” was repeated in “the fields of Moab” (cf. Deuteronomy 34:1; the place where Moses repeated many of the commandments contained in the other books of the Pentateuch), we may infer that all its general rules and specific prescriptions must have been promulgated on Sinai. The here appears therefore to be unnecessary but Scripture by mentioning it intends בהר סיני express mention of to teach regarding every Divine command (lit., Divine utterance) that was spoken to Moses that in every case they, their general rules and minute details originated at Sinai and that they were only repeated again in “the .”fields of Moab

# Behar

## **SHEMITTA**

At the beginning of the *parasha*, Rashi deals with the famous question, “What does *Shemitta* have to do with Mount Sinai? Were not all the mitzvot given at Sinai?” (Rashi, Lev. 25:1).

The answer that he gives is very surprising and not entirely sufficient: “Just as the laws of *Shemitta* were revealed at Sinai with all their general principles and details, so all of the mitzvot were revealed at Sinai with all of their general principles and details.”

This answer explains what Mount Sinai has to do with *Shemitta*, but not at all what *Shemitta* has to do with Mount Sinai. According to Rashi, Mount Sinai had to be mentioned here in order to teach us that even though *Shemitta* is already mentioned elsewhere in the Torah, all of its principles and details were revealed at Sinai, and the same applies to all the other mitzvot as well. Yet even if this mitzva is the paradigm for the other mitzvot, the question still remains: Why was *Shemitta* the mitzva that was specifically chosen to be mentioned in connection with Mount Sinai?

The whole subject of “Shabbat of the Land” – *Shemitta* and the Jubilee year – is known to be a very important matter in the Torah, of far more importance than is ascribed to it nowadays, and one of the proofs for this is in the next *parasha*.

## *Leviticus*

Toward the end of the *Tokheha* (the section of reproof in Leviticus 26), it says, “Then the Land will enjoy its *Shabbatot*... As long as it is desolate, it will enjoy the Sabbatical rest that you would not give it while you were living on it” (Lev. 26:34–35). The implication is that the great *Tokheha* refers specifically to the laws of *Shemitta* and the Jubilee year.

When Jeremiah discusses why the Land was destroyed, what emerges is that God overlooks forbidden sexual relationships, idolatry, and bloodshed, but He does not overlook neglect of the Torah (Jer. 9). In our *parashot* as well, a similar idea emerges. The implication here is that God overlooked forbidden sexual relationships and bloodshed, but not the laws of *Shemitta*. He is willing to forgive us for everything, but what ultimately creates the great destruction foretold in the *Tokheha* is the disregard of the laws of *Shemitta*. In the Mishna’s list of sins deemed responsible for punishment coming into the world as well, it can be observed that neglecting the laws of *Shemitta* occupies a central place (Avot 5:8–9).

### ... A KINGDOM OF PRIESTS

What, then, does all this have to do with Mount Sinai? *Shemitta* has to do with Mount Sinai in that this *parasha* is the essence of what happened

267

### *Leviticus*

at Mount Sinai. The revelation at Sinai represented the acceptance of the service of God in both senses: divine lordship and our service. In *Parashat Behar* this is expressed precisely, in detailed form; here, the Torah explains what it means that He is our Master and we are His servants, how this comes to expression, and what it relates to.

This is exactly what God told us at Mount Sinai even before the giving of the Torah. Those last moments before the Torah was given were moments in which God had not yet “forcibly imposed” the Torah upon us (see Shabbat 88a). And at that time God said, “And now, if you will obey Me and keep My covenant, you shall be My special treasure among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine. You shall be to Me a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5–6).

The concept of “a kingdom of Priests” is the essence of our service. As the Ibn Ezra and others explain, “Priests” in this context means servants: You are God’s servants. As the Torah relates, “Moses... set before them all these words... And all the people answered as one and said, ‘All that God has spoken we will do’” (Ex. 19:7–8). God asks the people if they want to be His servants. The people answer that although they don’t yet know the details, they do want to be the servants of God.

Here, too, in *Parashat Behar*, God says to us: “You are Mine.” We cannot have true ownership of anything, but God will always provide for us, even when we act like schlimazels. If we think that we are successful on our own merits and that everything is our own, then God will simply take it back. But if we are unsuccessful and lose everything, He will provide for us.

All this we took upon ourselves already at Mount Sinai. Even then we agreed to be God’s servants, His tenant-farmers – on condition that we would also receive usage rights.

268

## Behukotai

21. And if you remain **hostile** toward Me and refuse to obey Me, I will go on smiting you sevenfold for your sins...
23. And if these things fail to discipline you for Me, and you remain **hostile** to Me,
24. I too will remain **hostile** to you: I in turn will smite you sevenfold for your sins.
25. I will bring a sword against you to wreak vengeance for the covenant; and if you withdraw into your cities, I will send pestilence among you, and you shall be delivered into enemy hands...
27. But if, despite this, you disobey Me and remain **hostile** to Me,
28. I will act against you in wrathful **hostility**; I, for My part, will discipline you sevenfold for your sins.

### Rabbi Steinsaltz interpretation:

- 21. And if you walk recalcitrantly with Me**, in rebellion, **and you do not wish to heed Me**, as you learn nothing from the punishments, then **I will amplify My blow upon you sevenfold in accordance with your sins...**
- 23. And if with these too you are not chastised to Me**, by accepting My reproof, **and you walk recalcitrantly with Me;**
- 24. so I also will walk with you recalcitrantly**, in the same harsh and forceful manner, **and I too will smite you sevenfold for your sins.**
- 25. I will bring upon you a sword of war, avenging the vengeance of the broken covenant; you shall be gathered into your cities**, to hide from the enemy. Also, **I will send forth pestilence among you**. When you are crowded within your cities, a plague will be all the more deadly. **And eventually you shall be delivered into the hand of an enemy**, as your cities will be unprotected...
- 27. And if with even this**, actual hunger, when the hardships and disasters increase, **you do not heed Me, and you walk recalcitrantly with Me;**
- 28. I will walk with you in recalcitrant fury**. After causing a food shortage and harming your welfare, I will bring further horrors upon you: **I, too, will chastise you sevenfold for your sins.**

# Behukkotai

## “IF YOU WALK CONTRARY WITH ME”

The *Tokhefa* section in Leviticus 26 contains several repeated expressions, including, “If you walk contrary (*bekeri*) with Me.” According to an interpretation cited by Rashi, this refers to the sin of interpreting every event in life as an accident (*mikreh*). When something bad happens, it is often easy to write it off as an accident. This can minimize the impact of such an event, disregarding its greater implications for one’s life.

When one thinks of the last fifty or one hundred years, it is clear that this problem still exists in modern times. During this period, highly significant events occurred and various processes unfolded that greatly influenced the world and its inhabitants. Regarding each one of these events and processes, it is important to determine the lesson to take away from it. What can we learn from this? What is the conclusion to be drawn from it, and what should be changed as a result? These questions are relevant whether we are speaking about the Holocaust, about the establishment of the State of Israel, or about assimilation, which, although it may not seem as dramatic as the other events, is no less significant for the Jewish people in the long run.

Today, assimilation has reached proportions the likes of which we have not seen in over two thousand years. The majority of the Jewish people has no interest in Judaism. Not since the Hellenistic period, perhaps, have we lived in a time when to be a Jew is a matter of nationality, race, family,

## Leviticus

and other factors, but not a matter of religion. Statistics today show that for every second that goes by, there is approximately one less Jew in the world; not because he is killed, but because he assimilates among the non-Jews.

This situation, which pertains not just to anomalous individuals but to the entire community, is a tremendous change for us, and we have already forgotten how to deal with such a problem. We know how to deal with one apostate or what to do in the case of a minor misfortune; but how do we cope with the kind of traumatic phenomenon that affects an entire people? Assimilation today is an entirely different kind of problem from what we have dealt with in the past; it is a crisis like no other.

This situation is an example of what *Parashat Behukkotai* calls “If you walk contrary with Me”; it is clear that we have learned nothing from our history. To be sure, there are certainly individuals who have learned from past events. Those who abandoned their faith after the Holocaust had suffered through an incredible horror, and essentially said, “Master of the Universe, we cannot carry on anymore; we cannot say that our suffering was simply bad luck. If You exist, You are not watching; and if You are watching, then such a thing would not have happened.” These people did not “walk contrary”; they did not attribute world events to chance. The events in our lives have significance, and if they indeed have significance, one cannot remain complacent in response to them; one must draw conclusions from them. But the people as a whole did not respond like these individuals did; instead, they learned nothing at all.

There are those who see a bird flying and chirping and are able to understand what the bird is saying. Rabbi Nachman of Breslov said that after reaching the Land of Israel, he learned why a heap of straw lies in the street lengthwise and not widthwise. Granted, these are arcane matters. But in our case, we are not speaking here about a heap of straw in the street or about hearing a bird chirping. We are talking about catastrophes, events that have shocked the whole world. Yet no response, no conclusion, and no upshot has been drawn from all of this – nothing at all. Everyone carries on as before.

## BLAMING OTHERS

When, occasionally, someone does attempt to infer some lesson, the conclusion drawn is generally that someone else is to blame. It is in

our nature to look around and search for a guilty party, to determine on whom to pin the blame. Blaming others is often a way of saying that everything that happened proves that one's approach was correct, and it was this other person who caused all the world's problems. Thus, nowadays there are Jews whose main principle of faith is that Zionism brought about the Holocaust. On all the other principles they are willing to compromise, but not on this one.

Conversely, when something good happens, it is the common practice of many people to take credit for it. Others were useful by not getting in the way, or at best they may have helped a bit, but I was the one who saved the day, whether by reciting psalms or by the force of my gun.

One way or another, everything that happens, whether good or bad, makes no impact and effects no change. This is the precise definition of "If you walk contrary with Me."

The *parasha* describes the horrifying consequences of this kind of attitude toward God:

If you walk contrary with Me and will not obey Me, I will go on smiting you ... And I will send the beast of the field among you, which will rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle, and make you few in number, and your ways will become desolate. And if in spite of these things you will not be corrected unto Me, but walk contrary with Me ... I in turn will smite you sevenfold for your sins. And I will bring upon you an avenging sword ... When I break your staff of bread, ten women will bake your bread in one oven ... and you will eat and not be satisfied ... And you will eat the flesh of your sons. (Lev. 26:21–29).

All this because "you walk contrary with Me" (26:27).

There is a kind of mechanism in man whereby even when he is hit with one affliction after another, he remains unmoved. When retribution comes, everyone immediately looks at his neighbor instead of deep within himself and, as a result, nothing changes. So long as one knows who caused all these afflictions, it is easy to live with all the troubles. In spite of all the admonishment, everything remains as it was before.

One who does not walk contrary is one who attaches meaning, importance, and significance to everything that happens around him. But learning a moral lesson regarding oneself and not automatically looking to someone else is very uncommon.

During the Sinai Campaign, the previous Belzer Rebbe, who was well known for his holiness and piety, stood for two full days in prayer. He was not suspected of being a Zionist, nor did he suddenly become one. But this was a time of great crisis in the world, and there are times when a person changes his mind in response to a crisis, even if not by dramatic declarations.

The hope is that, beyond a certain point, a person can no longer truly claim that a momentous event was a chance occurrence, and he will then understand that he requires rectification and that he must examine his deeds.

#### **"WE AND OUR FATHERS HAVE SINNED"**

Toward the end of the *Tokhefa*, there is another matter that is surprising in several respects: "They will then confess their sins and the sins of their fathers, in that they were unfaithful to me and walked contrary with me" (Lev. 26:40). The confession is not only for sins but also for "walking contrary with God" – that is, for the imperviousness that does not allow one to see things correctly. But what is the meaning of "they will then confess their sins and the sins of their fathers"? Every time we recite the *Viduy* and confess our sins, we use this very formula: "But we and our fathers have sinned," and perhaps for this very reason we no longer notice how odd it is. It makes perfect sense to confess one's own sins, with which one is well acquainted. I have sinned, gone astray, transgressed. But what right do I have to drag my father and grandfather into a confession of these sins?

It is only natural for a person to automatically justify the practices to which he has grown accustomed. People often defend their dubious practices by claiming, "This is how I was brought up, this is my style, this is my custom." Hence, when one wants to make a real confession, this confession cannot suffice with one's own problems. One cannot merely atone for one's own sins within one's own sphere, claiming that these are the only things that fall within one's sphere of



responsibility and within the sphere of one's *teshuva*. Rather, one should consider that perhaps "we and our fathers have sinned." He should be willing to examine not only his own personal sins but also the sins of his fathers. Perhaps an error was made that encompasses more than what one did yesterday afternoon. One may have to go back five years, ten years, twenty years – perhaps there is an error that has persisted for generations.

Hence, the Torah says, "Those of you who survive will deteriorate because of their iniquity in the lands of your enemies, and they will deteriorate also because of the iniquities of their fathers. They will then confess their sins and the sins of their fathers" (Lev. 26:39–40) – because that is part of the reckoning. True soul searching must include not only the personal picture but the broader picture.

Whenever any major event happens, one must always ask: What does this mean? What does it imply? What are its implications? Such a comprehensive examination is always challenging for everyone involved, but it must be done; for if it is not comprehensive, the whole examination loses its significance.

#### ABHORRENCE

Not every sin is specified in the *parasha*, but there is one expression that appears twice, in two different but parallel contexts. At the beginning of the *parasha*, the Torah says, "I will set My presence among you, and I will not abhor you" (Lev. 26:11), and a few verses later, at the beginning of the *Tokheḥa*, it says, "If you reject My statutes and abhor My laws, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant" (26:15); and the expression recurs repeatedly.

Generally, when discussing the performance of the mitzvot, one speaks of the practical side: what one must do and what one must not do, and how one must act in regard to laws, statutes, commandments, or covenants. Here, however, the expression concerns a different aspect of the mitzvot. Were they abhorrent or loathsome to you? This is an expression that does not relate to one's actions. Abhorrence pertains to a sphere that is outside and beyond the performance itself. It asks: In what manner did you perform the mitzvot? What did you feel toward them? With what emotion did you perform them?

Again, the issue here is not the actions one has taken that led to a transgression. The question of abhorrence relates to a different aspect. The process that leads to "you abhor My laws" begins with indifference. Indifference is soon followed by loathing, a feeling that the mitzvot are repulsive. Thus, a person can continue doing all that is required of him in practice, and yet loathe and abhor it. He carries out all the orders, but does not care at all about them; in fact, they disgust him.

On the verse, "because you did not serve God your Lord with joy and with gladness over the abundance of all things" (Deut. 28:47), it is said in the name of the Ari<sup>1</sup> that this is the root of, and reason for, all the punishments of the *Tokheḥa*. It is not because "you did not serve God your Lord" but because "you did not serve with joy." Because you do not serve God with joy, you suffer the whole, long *Tokheḥa*, ninety-eight curses in all. The reason for this is that what lies beneath deeds that are not performed with joy is "you reject My statutes and abhor My laws." It may seem unnecessary to perform a mitzva joyfully. Is it not enough to perform the laws in comprehensive detail? Must we be happy about it as well? The Torah's answer is yes – we must serve with joy.

In previous generations, when people would hear the recitation of the *Tokheḥa* in the synagogue – "If you walk contrary with Me"; "If you reject and abhor" – they would tremble in fear. In order to deflect self-scrutiny, many people would rationalize that the *Tokheḥa* applies only to the Torah reader, and not to them. This kind of thinking is vulgar and improper, not to mention ignorant. Nevertheless, it reflects an attitude of hearing the words of the Torah and experiencing a legitimate reaction – quivering with fear, feeling that the punishment described in the *Tokheḥa* may fall on him at any moment.

Nowadays, when the *Tokheḥa* is read in the synagogue, if the reader misses a cantillation mark or a vowel point, the congregants will stop him and tell him to repeat the verse with the proper pronunciation. The truth is that, in doing this, the congregants are following halakha. Why should this *parasha* be any different from all the other *parashot* in the Torah? Nevertheless, it should alarm us that the *Tokheḥa*, which used to inspire such terror, has been reduced to a *zakef katan* or a *mappik keh*.

1. Rabbi Isaac Luria.

Similarly, many people use the recitation of *Shema* simply as an opportunity to emphatically draw out the pronunciation of the letter *zayin* in the words “*lemaan tizkeru*”<sup>2</sup> (Num. 15:40); everything else stated in the *Shema* is irrelevant. “You shall love God your Lord” (Deut. 6:5) is unimportant; but to draw out the *zayin* – that is of real substance.

These examples show that many seemingly pious people do not actually care about the mitzvot; there is only contempt and abhorrence toward them.

**“WHY IS THE LAND DESTROYED?”**

In his introduction to *Tiferet Yisrael*, the Maharal writes at great length on the verse, “Why is the land destroyed... Because they have forsaken My Torah” (Jer. 9:11–12). The Talmud explains that “they have forsaken My Torah” means “they did not first recite the blessing for the Torah” (Bava Metzia 85b).

At first glance, the Talmud’s explanation seems difficult to understand. For sins like bloodshed, forbidden sexual relationships, and idolatry, God does not react so harshly. They are certainly considered serious sins, but they are not the sins for which the land was destroyed and the Temple razed. God surely does not react this harshly to other offenses of similar insignificance. So why is the sin of neglecting the blessing for the Torah treated with such severity?

The Maharal answers that the people who “did not first recite the blessing for the Torah” were connected to the Torah without God’s involvement. They followed all the mitzvot, but did not appreciate the very root of the matter. God was irrelevant to them, and it was because of this attitude that the land was destroyed.

The Midrash states that “God overlooked idolatry, forbidden sexual relationships, and bloodshed, but did not overlook contempt for the Torah” (Lamentations Rabba, introduction, 2). It is not that God forgave these major sins, only that these sins can always be rectified in this world or the next through *teshuva*, whether it is on one’s deathbed

2. The purpose of this custom is to ensure that the word does not sound like “*tiskeru*,” which would distort the meaning of the verse.

or even after his death. But regarding the sin of contempt for the Torah there apparently is no atonement.

The Talmud describes the *Shekhina*’s departure from the Sanctuary, detailing its movement from station to station, corresponding to its exile: From the Ark-cover to the cherub, from the first cherub to the second cherub, from the second cherub to the threshold of the Holy of Holies, and from there to the courtyard and then to the Altar, and so forth, until “it ascended and abode in its place” (Rosh HaShana 31a). But why should we care that the *Shekhina* has departed? Why does it matter precisely where God dwells? If He wants to live on the second floor, let Him live on the second floor; what does that have to do with me? This is the root of the problem: Man does not care about God, and so he is left only with the external aspect of everything.

The *Tokhefa* comes in response to this attitude of contempt and abhorrence – and not necessarily because of the performance. God promises that if we follow His laws, He will look at us, “and I will not abhor you” (Lev. 26:11).

It could have been that when a person behaved in a certain way, he would simply make God feel nauseous; God would look at him and feel like vomiting. God therefore promises: “I will not abhor you.” Despite all the sins, “I will not reject them or abhor them” (Lev. 26:44).