



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Bechukotai (בְּחֻקָּי, "In my statutes")**
- **Chapters: Leviticus 26:3-27:34**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Our Torah portion begins with the promise that if the Israelites would walk in the LORD's statutes (*chukkot*) and commandments (*mitzvot*) and perform them, then they would enjoy material blessings and dwell securely in the promised land. Moreover the LORD Himself would make His dwelling with them and would walk among them as their God. The people of Israel would then truly be *am segulah* - a treasured people among all the nations of the earth.

On the other hand, if the people disobeyed God and disregarded His commandments, then they would be considered covenant-breakers, and they would experience all manner of distress and tribulation in their lives. They would experience panic attacks, diseases, heartache, and all manner of *tsuris* (vexation, trouble). Their enemies would eat their increase and those who hate them would rule over them. They would flee at the rustle of a leaf, and their lives would be full of terror and misery – all because they refused to put God first in their lives. And if after all this the people would still refuse to return to the LORD, the worst punishment of all would befall them: exile from the promised land and banishment from the Presence of the LORD Himself.

Nonetheless, *despite* their disobedience, God's love and mercy for Israel would never fully depart, for "if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers in their treachery that they committed against me, and also in walking contrary to me, so that I walked contrary to them and brought them into the land of their enemies – if then their uncircumcised heart is humbled and they make amends for their iniquity, then I will remember my covenant with Jacob, and I will remember my covenant with Isaac and my covenant with Abraham, and I will remember the land" (Lev. 26:40-42). Moreover, even while they are in exile, in the land of their enemies, God vowed: "I will not cast them away; nor will I ever abhor them to destroy them and to break My covenant with them; for I am the LORD their God" (Lev. 26:44).

The portion ends with a discussion of various laws pertaining to vows and tithes that a person may make to contribute towards the upkeep of the Sanctuary. These include dedications of persons, animals, houses, and lands. The Book of Leviticus ends with the statement: "These are the commandments that the LORD commanded Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai."



Basic Questions

1. What is the Hebrew word for “statute,” and what does it mean? ¹
2. What is the Hebrew word for “commandment,” and what does it mean? ²
3. What is the central meaning of the Shema (“Hear, O Israel...”) ? ³
4. What does it mean to “walk” in God’s statutes and “guard” His commandments? ⁴
5. According to Jewish tradition, how many blessings does one get if they study Torah? ⁵
6. What is customary to do before and after reading your book of the Torah? ⁶
7. What does “Torah lishmah” mean? ⁷
8. List some of the blessings God promises if we learn Torah and keep the commandments. ⁸
9. What are some of the consequences we will face if we neglect to learn Torah? ⁹
10. According to the Torah, what is the reason the land may not produce a good harvest? ¹⁰
11. What was one of the main reasons God gave for the Babylonian Exile? ¹¹
12. Why is the commandment of offering tithes given right after the threat of punishment? ¹²
13. Even when the Israelites are in exile for their sins, what does God promise them? ¹³
14. Can you list the names of all ten portions from the Book of Leviticus? ¹⁴
15. What do we customarily say when we complete a book of the Torah? ¹⁵

¹ *Chok* (חֹק), meaning a decree “inscribed” without a reason (i.e., a divine fiat). The plural is *chukkim*.

² *Mitzvah* (מִצְוָה), from *tzava*, meaning to instruct or to command. A mitzvah is a divine commandment.

³ That we should love the LORD our God *bekhol levavkha* – with “all our heart.” In Jewish tradition, a Yeshiva student will study Torah 12 hours a day, pray 2 hours a day, take care of bodily needs 2 hours a day, and sleep the remaining 8 hours. If he continues on this schedule, he will eventually become *Gadol B’Torah*.

⁴ According to Jewish tradition, this means working very hard to study the Torah (עֲמִלִּים בַּתּוֹרָה). We should study the Torah and the Scriptures “with all our heart and might.”

⁵ 22 blessings, from Aleph (א) to Tav (ת) – the first and last letters of the “blessing section” of this portion.

⁶ It is customary to kiss the book to show your love for God’s truth.

⁷ Torah study for the sake of heaven; Torah for “its own sake.” The sages maintain that the entire world is dependent on the study of Torah (Talmud Torah) and the love of Torah for its own sake.

⁸ Peace and prosperity; bountiful crops; security and protection from our enemies, fruitful family life. Best if all, we are promised God’s Presence will dwell among us.

⁹ Various forms of distress and tribulation, including plagues, enemy sieges, and national exile. Note that *bittul Torah* (בִּטּוּל תּוֹרָה), neglect of the Torah, is considered the first step away from God Himself.

¹⁰ Because the people are not listening to Him or obeying His truth.

¹¹ The failure to observe the Sabbatical Year (shemittah).

¹² Because *tzedakah* (charity) saves from death and punishment (Prov. 10:2; 11:4).

¹³ He promises to protect them and to always give them an opportunity to turn back to Him.

¹⁴ Vayikra, Tzav, Shemini, Tazria, Metzora, Acharei Mot, Kedoshim, Emor, Behar, and Bechukotai.

¹⁵ *Chazak, chazak, v’nitchazek* - “Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened!”



Discussion Topics

1. The sages said, “If there is no bread, there is no Torah; and if there is no Torah, there is no bread” (Avot 3:17). Our Torah portion this week begins, “If you walk in my statutes ... you shall eat your bread ... and I will give peace ... and none shall make you afraid” (Lev. 26:3-5). Though Torah study may not literally “bake bread,” it provides the means by which bread itself will have any real significance to us... *Discuss.*
2. God has designed the human body so that its life requires sacrifice to live. Although physical food helps us survive, we must ask the question, *for what end?* Do we live for the sake of eating (and thereby live to eat for another day, and so on), or do we eat in order to live? If the latter, then what is the *goal* of such life? What is the source of its nutrient and where is it taking you? What does your soul or “inner man” feed upon to gain the spiritual *will* to live? What gets you up in the morning? *Discuss...*
3. In this Torah portion, God says that *if* we walk in His statutes, keep His commandments and do them, *then* we will have plenty to eat, live in prosperity and security. On the other hand, if we do not follow His commandments, we will be troubled and banished from His Presence. And yet we all know cases where the righteous suffer and the evil prosper. Think of the Book of Job, for instance. So why do bad things happen to good people, and vice-versa, and how are we to make sense of this in light of the basic principles taught in this Torah portion?
4. Jewish tradition calls chapter of Leviticus 26 as the “tochechah” (תּוֹכְחָה) - a harshly detailed prediction of what will happen to the people of Israel when they turn away from God. According to the sages, the focus is not, “If you walk in my laws” (Lev. 26:3), but rather, “if you do not listen (*shema*) to me” (Lev. 26:14). Indeed, the “rebuke” portion begins with *v'im lo tishme'u li* (וְאִם-לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ לִי), which recalls the Shema and the duty to love the God *bekhol levavkha*, “with all your heart.” What motivates you more – the fear of God’s punishment or the hope of His reward? *Why?*
5. The sages note that divine censure would come if the people “forgot” about God or otherwise became *careless* in their observance of His laws. They point out that the refrain “if you walk *contrary* to me” is better translated as “if you walk *carelessly* (i.e., *keri*: קֵרִי) with me.” Rashi notes that the verb *kara* (קָרָה) means “to befall” or “to happen” and therefore suggests a sense of randomness (the related word *mikreh* (מִקְרָה) means “coincidence”). If the people regard the events of life as “random,” then God would reciprocate by bringing senseless trouble into their lives... For this reason having a careless attitude about God’s will may be the very first step to apostasy. Do you think that there are genuine coincidences in life, or does everything that happens *have* to have a reason? *Discuss.*
6. The sages state: “All sins derive from the sin of *insignificance*: when a person ceases to be sensitive to the great importance which God attaches to his life and deeds. ‘I don't really matter’ is not humility - it is the ultimate arrogance. It really means: ‘I can do what I want.’ The most terrible of punishments is for God to indulge the sinner this vanity and to say: ‘All right, have it your way; what happens to you is of no significance...’” Discuss how this line of thinking agrees with Paul’s statement that God “gives people” up to a debased mind because they willingly chose to suppress the truth (Rom. 1:18-28).



7. Regarding the curses of this section, I'd like to relate a beautiful story I once read. The child of a famous Torah sage was used to hearing his father read the weekly Torah portion at synagogue, but on the Shabbat of Bechukotai his father happened to be out of town, and the boy listened intently as a substitute Torah reader recited the various punishments listed in the parashah. Afterwards, the boy was so emotionally distraught that he fell into a deep depression that lasted for over a month. The child was later asked, "Why were you not disturbed this way when the admonition was read in past years?" The boy replied, "When father reads it, no curses are heard." How do you "hear" God's voice when you read about punishment for disobedience?
8. A student once asked his rebbe: "Do we get punished for our sins in this world?" His succinct response was, "Only if we are made fortunate..." The New Testament says that the Lord "disciplines the one he loves, and *reproves* every child whom he receives" (Heb. 12:5-6; Prov. 3:11-12). Discuss how God might use affliction in our lives for good.
9. In Galatians 3:13 we read, "The Messiah redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us," and yet we are still subject to the effects of the original sin of Adam (i.e., physical death, life in a sinful world, etc.) and we are still subject to divine discipline based on our adherence to the moral law: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life." (Gal. 6:7-8). Discuss what it means to "sow to the Spirit."
10. Though we are no longer "under the law, but grace," there are *consequences* for the choices we make in our lives: "For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Messiah and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience" (Eph. 5:6-7, 1 Cor. 6:9). *Discuss*.
11. Abraham Heschel once wrote, "God is of no importance unless he is of supreme importance." Yeshua said, "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either cold or hot! So, because you are *lukewarm*, and neither hot nor cold, I will vomit (ἐμέω) you out of my mouth" (Rev. 3:15-16). Discuss what you think being "lukewarm" means. Why does God make it impossible for us to be indifferent toward Him?
12. The only place in the Tanakh (i.e., "Old Testament") where the New Covenant is mentioned is in Jeremiah 33:31-33 where we read that God would "put my law (Torah) within them, and I will write it on their hearts." Discuss the relationship between the old and the new covenants. How are Christians to understand the law?

Chazak, Chazak, v'nitchazek! At the end of parashat Bechukotai, as with every other parashah that concludes a book of the Torah, we say, *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek* - "Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened!" Despite the "heaviness" associated with the idea of God's judgment and punishment, we must press on in faith. The great commandment is always "Choose Life!" (Deut. 30:19), and that life comes from the love of our Heavenly Father through Yeshua our Savior. May God help us return to our first love for Him *b'khol levavkha* - with all our hearts. "The LORD is good to those who hope for him, to the soul who seeks him" (Lam. 3:25).