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Shabbat Behukkotai
June 1, 2019 - 27 Iyyar 5779



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Wagering on the Meaning of Meaning

Torah Reading: Leviticus 26:3 - 27:34

Haftarah Reading: Jeremiah 16:19 - 17:14

Behukkotai is known for its aspect of tokhehah, admonition. This parashah details the consequences of pursuing God's laws (hukkot) and commandments (mitzvot), including the positive but dwelling upon the negative, in terms of sheer number and detail. The parashah begins, "If you walk in my laws (im behukkotai telekhu) and keep my commandments (et mitzvotai tishmeru)," and continues with promises such as, "I shall grant you rains at the correct times...I shall grant peace in your land...and turn towards you..." This opening section, in which the rewards of observance are explained, ends with the following pledge: "I shall ever walk in your midst (vehithalakhti betokhekhem)"—that is, just as Jews are to walk in God's ways, God promises to walk among the Jewish people, both verbs being derived from the same root. The parashah now turns to tokhehah, warning Jews that should they fail in this mission, God will—for starters—"bring upon you panic (behalah)," swiftly followed by decimating disease. (There is one other such passage of tokhehah in the Torah, which occurs in Parashat Ki Tavo in Devarim and bears similar themes). Strikingly, the consequences for failing to observe hukkot and mitzvot are not merely physical torments,

though there is no shortage of exile, starvation, and war among them. Repeatedly, the tokhehah mentioned is reik—void, as in void of meaning. The wayward will find themselves sowing seeds to no end, their energy exerted for no purpose. It is emptiness with which failure is answered.

In adducing suffering to the path a person takes, Behukkotai elicits one of the core questions with which humans struggle: why do bad things happen to good people, as they clearly do? And what could this mean? One response is to trust that there is reason, as suggested by the rabbinic summation of disbelief, “There is no judgment and there is no Judge” (leit din veleit dayyan), which first appears, interestingly, in a discussion in Vayikra Rabbah about the inclusion of Kohelet in the Tanakh, despite its potentially heretical ideas. The midrash singles out this notion—that God is indifferent—as problematic, implying that confidence in God’s ability to discern and respond to righteousness and malfeasance is at the very heart of being Jewish. And yet, human capability to comprehend justice in God’s creation is seemingly limited: we are unable to understand why we, or others, suffer, and thus to understand the meaning of our suffering. We are confronted by our limitations, wondering whether our suffering is illusory, to be comprehended or compensated for in some other lifetime; or whether, perhaps, we need to try harder to discern the reasons we suffer.

Interestingly, Behukkotai evinces both possibilities: that our suffering only appears to be pointless and that we are responsible to interpret it as meaningful. Its term for both the cause and the consequence of malfeasance is keri: “If you do not listen to Me and you walk (hithalakhtem, the same verb again) with Me in keri, I will thus walk (halakhti) with you in keri.” The meaning of keri, which is repeated an emphatic seven times in the tokhehah section of Behukkotai and nowhere else in the Torah, is debated among the text’s interpreters. Rashi suggests two possibilities: the first, drawn from Sifra, connects keri with the root k-r-h, “to happen, occur by chance,” while the second, drawn from grammarian Menahem ben Saruk, understands keri to mean restraint. Unexpectedly, Ibn Ezra concurs with Rashi: he, too, suggests that keri can mean either restraint or randomness, endorsing both without stating his preference. In both of these senses, keri denotes not a type of behavior, but a type of attitude. This is why Rambam, who did not write a line commentary on the Torah, brings up keri in the context of repentance. Rambam’s interpretation of the term appears in Mishneh Torah, in the section about laws of fasting. There he cites Vayikra 26 and defines keri as meaning a chance occurrence, which obstructs repentance by absolving one of understanding their actions to require correction. In light of how Rambam, Ibn Ezra, and Rashi understand keri, we can read Behukkotai as entreating us to act faithfully as if we comprehend the judgment and the Judge—to borrow the language of literary critic George Steiner, who described this as-if process as a “wager on the meaning of meaning” that assumes the presence of the Transcendent, and appraised it essential to any creative act.

Still, this leaves us with little comfort if the meaning of our suffering is elusive. One possible answer lies in this week’s haftarah, from Yirmiyahu, which reflects the existential themes elicited in the Torah portion. Yirmiyahu stresses the importance of focusing on the Transcendent, as opposed to attuning ourselves to worldly success. The imagery used in the haftarah to bring this idea to life is of plants growing in the desert. Two shrubs have managed to sprout in the wilderness; both thirst for sustenance. They cannot know when it will come, or if they will survive until it does. One tree’s roots reach down to an underground wellspring, invisible at the surface, from which it draws nourishment, while the other wilts. Jeremiah’s shrubs suggest that keri refers to inward attention: the distinction between the shrubs is internally borne. Avoiding keri does not necessarily give us answers about suffering, but it does save us from reik, meaninglessness, by providing us with a path to walk. A desert plant can no more anticipate the coming rains than a person can know how walking in God’s ways will lead them, individually, to flourishing. It is one’s valuing of the path—sending down roots and being open to the finding meaning in our circumstances—that sustains us.

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