

Torah During the Time of COVID-19
Parshat Behar-Behukotai
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What are the blessings in your life? Have you had an opportunity to recently sit down and think about them and count them? For me, our congregation and community are blessings. The community we have created and the relationships we have formed within the Beth Sholom Temple family are truly blessings in so many people's lives.

This week's Torah portion is a double portion since it is a non-leap year. It is called Behar-Behukotai. In the second of these two portions, we are given a series of blessings and curses by God with consequences depending on our actions.

If we follow the laws of Torah, God promises us water for our land, sun for crops to grow, rains that are gentle so as not to harm the plants, and food to eat. Yet, if we transgress the laws, God promises retribution on us and for generations to come.

In commenting on a similar passage in Parshat Eikev in Deuteronomy, Rabbi Shira Milgrom states:

The text cautions that our residence on the land—whether it be Israel, Palestine, America, or the planet as a whole—is contingent upon gratitude. We will need to move beyond, "It's mine," "I earned it," "I worked for it," "My ancestors won it for me," or "God promised." We need to shift our perspective somehow from ownership to gift. The land, the water, springs and fountains, wheat and barley, vines, figs and pomegranates, olive trees and honey are all gift. The love may be unconditional, but the gift is perishable.¹

In other words, we need to be grateful for what we have received from God and take care of it. It is through the means of tending and tilling the land and the way we treat each other as human beings that we earn God's blessings.

Yet, extrapolating from the idea of needing to be grateful to God for the blessings we receive should also include humanity. It states in Genesis that we are all created in the image of God. If we are created in God's image, then we should act in such a manner. We need to act Godlike.

In today's world, there are many examples of individuals acting Godlike. Think of all the first responders, the medical personnel care for those with COVID-19, the caregivers and the essential workers ensuring that grocery stores remain open and our trash is picked up. Those a just a few of those who are acting Godlike in our world.

¹ <https://reformjudaism.org/learning/torah-study/eikev/all-you-need-love>

This portion teaches us that we should be grateful not just to God but to all those who are acting in a Godlike manner. It is easy to do. When you are standing in line getting ready to enter a place a business, say thank you to the greeter who is ensuring that that only the allowed number of people are in the store. Thank those checking you out at the registers. When you see the letter carriers and the garbage personnel, we should take the chance to acknowledge what they are doing in order to keep our communities functioning. If your neighbors are working in the hospitals and/or taking care of those ill with COVID-19, stop and thank them when you see them. It is a simple gesture that goes a long way to demonstrating just how grateful we are for them risking their lives on the front lines so that we may be in quarantine at home.

There are no coincidences in Torah. Somehow, the weekly portion reminds us just how timely Torah's lessons are for our modern world.

Thank you for the blessings that you bestow upon our world each and every day! May we be blessed with health, happiness and safety.

L'Shalom and Shabbat Shalom-
Rabbi Jennifer Weiner