

Parsha Plug: Behar-Bechukotai

We end the book of Vayikra with a list of blessings and curses (ברכות וקללות) contingent on our actions. Chazal wonder at how the idea of reward and punishment (שכר ועונש) can coexist with the Jewish principle that we are not supposed to do mitzvot for reward (על מנת לקבל פרס). How do you make sense of this? How do you personally relate to the concept of reward and punishment?

Why do you think Sefer Vayikra ends with blessings and curses, and why do we always read them before Shavuot? (For more on this, check out Megillah 31a)

Vayikra 26:3-17	ויקרא כו:ג-יז
<p>3 If you follow My statutes and observe My commandments and perform them, 4 I will give your rains in their time, the Land will yield its produce, and the tree of the field will give forth its fruit. 5 Your threshing will last until the vintage, and the vintage will last until the sowing; you will eat your food to satiety, and you will live in security in your land. 6 And I will grant peace in the Land, and you will lie down with no one to frighten [you]; I will remove wild beasts from the Land, and no army will pass through your land; 7 You will pursue your enemies, and they will fall by the sword before you; 8 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. 9 I will turn towards you, and I will make you fruitful and increase you, and I will set up My covenant with you. 10 You will eat very old [produce], and you will clear out the old from before the new. 11 And I will place My dwelling in your midst, and My Spirit will not reject you; 12 I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be My people. 13 I am the Lord, your God, Who took you out of the land of Egypt from being slaves to them; and I broke the pegs of your yoke and led you upright. 14 But if you do not listen to Me and do not perform all these commandments, 15 and if you despise My statutes and reject My ordinances, not performing any of My commandments, thereby breaking My covenant 16 then I too, will do the same to you; I will order upon you shock, consumption, fever, and diseases that cause hopeless longing and depression. You will sow your seed in vain, and your enemies will eat it. 17 I will set My attention against you, and you will be smitten before your enemies. Your enemies will rule over you; you will flee, but no one will be pursuing you...</p>	<p>ג אם-בַּחֲקָתִי תֵלְכוּ וְאֶת-מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעָשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם: ד וְנָתַתִּי גְשָׁמִיכֶם בְּעֵתָם וְנָתַנָּה הָאָרֶץ יְבוּלָהּ וְעֵץ הַשָּׂדֶה יִתֵּן פְּרִיָּו: ה וְהִשִּׁיג לָכֶם דִּישׁ אֶת-בִּצְיֹר וּבִצְיֹר יִשְׁגִּי אֶת-זֶרַע וְאָכַלְתֶּם לַחֲמֶכֶם לַשָּׁבַע וְיִשְׁבַּתֶּם לְבִטָּח בְּאַרְצְכֶם: ו וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ וְשָׁכַבְתֶּם וְאִין מַחְרִיד וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי חַיָּה רָעָה מִן-הָאָרֶץ וְחָרַב לֹא-תֵעָבֵר בְּאַרְצְכֶם: ז וּרְדַפְתֶּם אֶת-אִיְבֵיכֶם וְנָפְלוּ לִפְנֵיכֶם לַחֲרֹב: ח וּרְדְּפוּ מִפָּנֶי חַמְשָׁה מֵאָה וּמֵאָה מִפָּנֶי רִבְבָּהּ יִרְדְּפוּ וְנָפְלוּ אִיְבֵיכֶם לִפְנֵיכֶם לַחֲרֹב: ט וּפְגַמְתִּי אֲלֵיכֶם וְהִפְרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶתְכֶם וְהִקִּמְתִּי אֶת-בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם: י וְאָכַלְתֶּם יִשְׁן נוֹשָׁן וְיִשְׁן מִפְּנֵי חֹדֶשׁ תּוֹצִיאוּ: יא וְנָתַתִּי מִשְׁכָּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא-תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם: יב וְהִתְהַלַּכְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְהִיָּיתִי לָכֶם לְאֱלֹקִים וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ-לִי לְעָם: יג אֲנִי ה' אֱלֹקֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִהֵן תִּלְהֶם עֲבָדִים וְאֲשַׁבֵּר מִטָּת עַלְכֶם וְאוֹלֶךְ אֶתְכֶם קוֹמָמִיּוֹת: יד וְאִם-לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל-הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: טו וְאִם-בַּחֲקָתִי תִמָּאֲסוּ וְאִם אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטִי תִגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי לְהִפְרֹכֶם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי: טז אֶף-אֲנִי אֶעֱשֶׂה-יָד אֶת לְכֹס וְהִפְקַדְתִּי עֲלֵיכֶם בַּהֲלֵה אֶת-הַשְׁחָפָה וְאֶת-הַקְדָּחַת מְכֻלֹּת עֵינִים וּמַדִּיבֹת גִּפְשׁ וְזִרְעָתֶם לְרִיק זִרְעָכֶם וְאָכְלֶהוּ אִיְבֵיכֶם: יז וְנָתַתִּי פָנַי בָּכֶם וְנִגְפַתְּם לִפְנֵי אִיְבֵיכֶם וְרָדְוּ בָכֶם שְׁנֵאֵיכֶם וְנִסְתָּם וְאִין-רָדָף אֶתְכֶם:</p>

Rashi hones in on the problem of repetition in the beginning of our text. How does he resolve it? Do you agree with his reading? How does it add to your understanding of spiritual reward?

Rashi on Vayikra 26:3	רש"י ויקרא כו:ג
<p>If you follow My statutes: I might think that this refers to fulfillment of the commandments. But, when the verse says, "and observe My commandments," the</p>	<p>אם בחקתי תלכו: יכול זה קיום המצוות, כשהוא אומר ואת מצוותי תשמרו, הרי קיום המצוות אמור, הא מה אני מקיים</p>

fulfillment of the commandments is already stated. So what is the meaning of "If you follow My statutes"? It means that you must toil in the study of Torah.	אם בחקתי תלכו, שתהיו עמלים בתורה:
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Kedushat Levi addresses the question of repetition, which Rashi raised. Do you agree with his reading? How does it impact your thinking of Divine reward?

Kedushat Levi on Vayikra 26:3	קדושת לוי ויקרא כו:ג
The words: אם בחקותי תלכו, mean that "if you cleave to My statutes," you will be considered as "walking" on the right path, תלכו. The words: ואת מצותי תשמרו, refer to your planning, thinking of, performing My commandments, even if you have not succeeded for some reason to carry out your good intention, I will consider it as if you had done it, i.e. ועשיתם אותם.	וזהו אם בחקותי תלכו, דהיינו אם תדבקו בחקותי אזי תהיה בבחינת מהלך. ואת מצותי תשמרו, לשון שמר את הדבר (בראשית לז, יא) דהיינו עוד אני אומר באם שתשמרו את מצותי. כלומר, באם שתחשבו לעשות מצותי אף על פי שאין אתם עושים עדיין אזי ועשיתם אותם. פירוש, שתחשב בעיני כאלו עשיתם אותם לפי שמחשבה טובה הקדוש ברוך הוא מצרפה למעשה. וזהו ועשיתם אותם:

Or HaChayim builds off of Rashi's teaching and adds a new dimension. How does Or HaChayim interpret 'laboring' (as a positive or as a negative)? Where does reward fit in?

Or HaChayim on Vayikra 26:3	אור החיים ויקרא כו:ג
The reason the Torah refers to toiling over Torah by using the expression חקה (which can also mean to mimic or repeat) is because there is a commandment to study Torah again and again even if one had already studied them several times and they have been well absorbed. God wants us to study Torah out of a fondness for it and this is why He formulated a statute to that effect. Our sages (in Kohelet Rabbah 3) state that God decreed that we will forget part of what we learned in order that we should sit down and learn it repeatedly.	וטעם שקרא הכתוב עמל התורה חוקה, לצד שיש בה מצוה אפילו ללמוד דברים שלמדם פעמים וג' והם נטועים אצלו, כי חפץ ה' בעסק התורה חוקה חקק ותמצא שאמרו ז"ל (קהלת רבה פ"ג) כי לטעם שילמוד האדם תורה בחשק תמיד גזרה חכמתו יתברך שיהיה האדם לומד ושוכח.

Netivot Shalom views Rashi's interpretation of 'laboring over Torah' very differently than Or HaChayim does. How does Netivot Shalom differ? Do you identify (or not) with his way of viewing reward and punishment?

Netivot Shalom, Bechukotai (p.134-135) on שתהיו עמלים בתורה
We need to better understand the reference in our text to the fact that reward is promised specifically for laboring over Torah (Rashi)-- it is not reward for the <i>fulfillment</i> of mitzvot, as there is no reward in this world for mitzvah observance (the reward for that is in the next world)...Rambam explains that the reward in this world is referring to that which comes from a life of sadness. According to the greatness of the sorrow, such is the reward...This is what Rashi's interpretation of "If you follow my statutes" as "If you labor over Torah" means. For through the suffering, reward is promised...This is as it is taught in Midrash Tanchuma: God did not make a covenant with Israel except through the Oral Torah, as it says in Shemot 34: "Through these words I made a covenant with you". "These words" refers to the Oral Torah. All who love wealth and satisfaction will not be able to learn the Oral Torah, for it has in it much sadness, loss of sleep, exhaustion, and wearing down of the self through it. Only someone who loves God with all of his heart, soul, and might would learn it...And yet behold it is through the sadness and hard work that a Jew is

sorrowful in laboring over Torah that he merits to make a covenant with God, for God desires that Israel will labor over His Torah.

How we relate to reward and punishment-- from the second paragraph of Shema to the ברכות וקללות in our parsha-- gets at how we each perceive God's hand in our lives. It can bring up layers of spiritual evolution. But for many, our text can highlight profound spiritual doubts and questions. Rabbi Mel Gottlieb explores what role doubt has in having faith, as well as how we respond to spiritual difficulties.

Rabbi Mel Gottlieb, *Faith and Doubt* (from *Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals*)

The Ramhal states that doubt and evil were part of the divine plan to ultimately create a Messianic world. Indeed, our Sages posit that if we did not have doubt, we might be blasé about our spiritual tasks...The Midrash states at the end of *Vayehi* that when Jacob gives blessings to his sons on his death bed, he wants to reveal to them the time of the coming of the Messiah to support their faith. However, Jacob is prevented from doing so, because this knowledge would have attenuated the children's drive to seek meaning. It was necessary to have some doubt along the journey toward wholeness. Indeed, this dynamic is preferable to a life of absolute faith, which might lead to lethargy and mediocrity. The doubt would force them to conjure up greater faith in order to overcome their doubt thereby leading to greater virtuous deeds in their lifetime...As [Paul] Tillich says, "Doubt is not a permanent experience within the act of faith. But it is always present as an element in the structure of faith. There is no faith without an intrinsic 'in spite of' and the courageous affirmation of oneself in the state of ultimate concern." Furthermore, the ability to acknowledge our doubt leads to a clearing out of resistance and an opening to an existential faith which tolerates some doubt...[There are] times when we encounter challenges in our tradition that create some doubt, such as the second paragraph in the Shema that does not seem to be akin to our experience. But our rabbinic tradition continues to make Torah sacred through interpretation, and continues to develop relevant responses to modernity based on earlier precedents and sanctioned methodologies...[M]any of us live in assimilated communities, or in lonely spaces, and we also observe a world where evil prevails. Doubt and distancing from Hashem slowly creeps in. The antidote is reconnection. R. Nahman of Bratzlav suggests an exercise to return to faith when we reach a place of doubt and alienation. We must get to know our darkness, without remaining in a state of guilt and shame. Despair and self-flagellation are counterproductive. Rav Nahman comments on the verse *v'ahavata l'reakha kamokha* (Vayikra 19:17-18) by suggesting that the word *re'ah* (neighbor) has the root letters *reish* and *ayin*, which means evil (*rah*). Thus we must learn to love the darkness (evil) within, get to know it, and befriend it rather than repress or deny it out of shame; for if we do not identify our dark places we project that evil energy on to others. This, indeed, is the root of all discord in the world, alienation within and seeing others as darkened, rather than identifying these very qualities within ourselves...[W]ithin the order, there is also some disorder, so that we can be free to choose order, strengthen our faith, and know that the doubt that also arises at these times is a necessary concomitant in the pre Messianic world to strengthen our faith. When we reach the end of the days, the unity that we are currently missing will be manifest and the Great Faith will be the reality for all. Our task is to build toward that future by uplifting the world with our commitment to faith, to our connection to spirit, to love our fellow human beings and all who inhabit our planet and acknowledge doubt along the journey as a necessary companion.

Do you agree or disagree with Rabbi Gottlieb?

How do you approach the 'laboring' that comes with leading a life of Torah, or for that matter a life that is human?

What is your 'neighbor'? How can you change it from a source of curse into one of blessing?