BS”D

Parshas Bechukosai 5776

Rabbi Chaim Zev Citron

*What is a greater blessing than the opportunity to serve G-d, to be taught the path of righteousness, and to bring goodness and holiness into the world?*

The Time for Blessings

There are two *parshios* in the Torah which contain the *tochacha*, the prophecies of terrible punishment of the Jewish people if they abandon the Torah. The one in our parsha of Bechukosai is read shortly before Shavuos every year while the one in parshas Ki Tavo is read before Rosh Hashana.

But, in both cases, at least one parsha intervenes before the holidays so as to soften the blow of the tochacha. Bamidbar is always read before Shavuos and Nitzavim before Rosh Hashana.

The sages say the reading of the tochacha represents our prayer, “May the year and its curses end; may a year with blessings begin.”

Now this statement makes sense before Rosh Hashana as the old year ends and the new one begins. But Shavuos is not the beginning of a new year, so in what sense is the “old year” ending and the new one beginning?

The previous parsha (Behar), which contains the laws of the Shemita year, begins with the statement that G-d spoke to Moshe on Mt. Sinai. Our portion also states right after the tochacha that these are the laws which G-d gave on Mt. Sinai.

But the events at Mt. Sinai are stated much earlier in the Book of Shmos! In the third month of the first year of the Exodus, G-d gave the Torah at Sinai. After the sin of the golden calf, Moshe went up again to Mt. Sinai, returning afterwards with the second set of tablets. He then told the people to build the Mishkan, the Sanctuary for G-d. They did this, completing it in the first month of the *second* year of the Exodus.

The Book of Vayikra begins with G-d calling Moshe from the Mishkan and telling him the laws of sacrifices. Most of the rest of Vayikra goes through other laws that G-d told Moshe from the Sanctuary. So all of this is taking place in the *second* year of the Exodus. Then how come in the last two Parshios we suddenly find ourselves back at Mt. Sinai?

The Ibn Ezra says that in fact these two Parshios of Behar and Bechukosai, though they are the last in the Book of Vayikra, were actually said *before* the entire preceding parshios of Vayikra. In Parshas Mishpatim (in the Book of Shmos), it says Moshe wrote the book of the covenant (24:4) and read it to the people (24:7). That book included not only the portion of Mishpatim, but the portions of Behar and Bechukosai as well. So why does the Torah record it at the end of Vayikra instead of in its place in Mishpatim?

Earlier in the Parshios of Achrei and Kedoshim, the Torah lays out the code of moral conduct. The Torah warns that if the people behave in an immoral way, they will be rejected by the land and exiled. The Ibn Ezra refers to this as a “condition of the land.”

Our parsha also lays out a condition: the observing of the seventh year as a year in which the land rests. The Torah states that during the exile, the land shall rest and make up for the years that the Jews did not observe the Shabbos year (see Vayikra 26: 34, 35). Observing the Shabbos year is also a “condition of the land.”

The Torah wanted to put the two conditions close to one another, says the Ibn Ezra. Therefore, the Torah placed the laws of the seventh year (Behar) and the tochacha (Bechukosai) at the end of Vayikra although they were originally said right after the giving of the Torah. The Torah here juxtaposes the two “conditions of the land.”

The Ramban does not agree with this approach. Here is the order of the events as the Ramban sees them:

During the first 40 days at Sinai, G-d told Moshe the laws found in the parsha of Mishpatim and made a covenant with the Jewish people. Meanwhile, the Jews had made the golden calf. The covenant was put on hold. Moshe went back up the mountain to plead for the Jews. G-d accepted his prayers, the second set of tablets were given to him, and the covenant was reaffirmed. At that point, the material in our two Parshios was told to Moshe. The blessings and the curses were inserted to strengthen the covenant.

When Moshe returned from Mt. Sinai with the new tablets, he instructed the people to build the Mishkan, the Sanctuary that marked G-d’s presence in the midst of the people. In due time, the Sanctuary was built. Then, as the Book of Vayikra begins, G-d called Moshe from the Mishkan and told him the laws found in that book. Finally, when those laws were completed, Moshe told the Jews the remaining laws and the blessings and the curses that he had been told on Sinai. In other words, the public teaching of the material found in Behar, Bechukosai did happen in chronological order. After teaching all of the laws of Vayikra, Moshe taught the remaining laws and reaffirmed the covenant that he had heard at Sinai.

I would raise a mild objection to the Ramban. When Moshe came down from the mountain and told the Jews to build the Sanctuary, why didn’t he also tell them about the last part of the covenant, i.e., the parsha of Behar and Bechukosai? Even if he had a reason to wait, what is the significance of his belatedly telling those teachings at this particular time? I’m sure the Ramban could answer this objection; I merely point it out as a question to think about.

Rashi avoids the entire issue of the debate between the Ibn Ezra and the Ramban by explaining the passages as being a general teaching that all of the Torah was told to Moshe at Mt. Sinai. “Just as the laws of Shemita were told both in a general and in a detailed manner at Sinai, so all of the Mitzvos were told both in a general and practical way at Sinai.”

The Ramban explains this teaching as follows:

In the parsha of Mishpatim, Shemita is mentioned just generally. Were the details spelled out only later at some point? No. The Torah in our parsha tells the laws in detail and specifies that these details, too, were said at Sinai. So, too, *all* of the Mitzvos were spelled out at Sinai although the details appear in the Torah only later on.

Now, whether we learn like the Ibn Ezra or like the Ramban, the blessings and curses in our parsha are connected with the giving of the Torah on Sinai.

The Torah is the source of infinite blessing for each individual, for the community, and indeed for the world. What is a greater blessing than the opportunity to serve G-d, to be taught the path of righteousness, and to bring goodness and holiness into the world?

But if one renounces G-d and the Torah, one has refused these blessings, and so what is left? Almost by definition, a life bereft of blessing and filled with its opposite: A life without meaning, a life of desperation, a life of emptiness.

As we approach Shavuos and we relive the giving of the Torah, we realize that our lives in the past year may have turned aside from the Torah way in some respects and instead of meriting blessings we brought the opposite upon ourselves. So we say, “Let the year and its curses end.” Let us return to complete lives of Torah and of G-dliness. And as we continue our lives after receiving the Torah anew, “Let a year with blessings begin.

Let us be inspired in His ways and in His Torah and merit true blessing. And may we indeed merit the ultimate blessing of the coming of Moshiach speedily in our days.