



Around the Shabbat Table

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This week's writer This week's writer, Bette Birnbaum, is a graduate student at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America in the William Davidson School of Jewish Education.

Shalom!

Introduction

This week's parasha, Be-hukkotai, concludes the Book of Leviticus. Finishing any of the five books of the Torah is a major event and a cause for celebration. In the synagogue, it is customary to mark the milestone by rising and reciting the phrase "hazak hazak v'nitkhzehk, "be strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened." Before we move on to the next book in the endless loop of Torah reading, we acknowledge our pride in what we have learned and look forward to learning more.

What are the Book of Leviticus and its conclusion, Be-hukkotai, all about? Most of the Book of Leviticus consists of collections of religious law and descriptions of ritual celebration. Parashat Be-hukkotai, "in My Laws," an epilogue to the religious and legal texts of Leviticus, stresses adherence to these laws. For this reason, its primary themes are Divine reward and punishment and human free will. That is, it is up to Israel whether to follow in God's ways.

The bulk of Be-hukkotai can be divided into three parts. The first part is just ten verses long and contains words of blessing. If the Israelites heed God's laws, God guarantees they will have the good things of life, including peace, prosperity, fertility, agricultural abundance, and security.

Many commentators have noted that in contrast with the first part of the parasha, the second part, the *tochecha* or “Execration” is relatively long. Its 28 verses describe punishments that Israel will endure for disobedience. When God spurns the nation of Israel, enemies will dominate, the land will not produce, and the people will live in fear. Worse, they will be scattered among the nations and become exiles in hostile lands.

The third part sounds a hopeful note. Even in exile, God will not forget or destroy Israel. When the people atone for their disobedience, God will remember the covenant with the Patriarchs from Jacob back to Abraham, the covenant with the generation that was freed from Egypt, and Israel’s land.



Questions for your Family’s Discussion

As your family shares a meal this Friday night, you might want to discuss the following questions:

1. The Torah conceives of obeying God’s laws as the right “path” of life, and the Bible often speaks of the good life as the way we are “to go.” Before the blessings that are promised in return for obedience to God, our parasha states, *im be-hukkotai telekhu*, meaning “if you walk in My laws.” (In the same vein, the word *halakhah*, from the root same Hebrew root, *halakh*, “to go,” refers to the legal side of Judaism that has come down to us and continues to develop.)

What does walking in a law mean to you? If God’s laws truly form a path, where does the path lead? For what reasons might we stray off the path? Is it possible to get back on the path?

2. Using the first ten verses of *Be-hukkotai* as your starting part, discuss the ways in which your family is blessed. Are you blessed in ways that are not mentioned in the text? In what ways is our society blessed?

A Text to Wrestle With

Twice a day, morning and evening, many Jews recite our central monotheistic creed, *Sh’ma*, and its accompanying blessings. The following text, part of the second paragraph of *Sh’ma*, expresses the same theology of reward and punishment as parashat *Be-hukkotai*:

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin about you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil—I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord’s anger will flare up against

you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you. (Deut. 11:13-17; translation from new JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh)

1. Why do you follow rules and regulations? Is it because you want rewards and not punishments, or is it because doing so makes your family, community or society better, safer, more peaceful, or more prosperous?
2. Certain Jewish environmentalists have encouraged us to read this text as a warning to treat the natural world God gave us with care and respect. What messages does about ecology does the prayer suggest to you?

Towards an Action Agenda

The first word of the parahsa is *im*, literally “if.” With this word, the text teaches that we humans have free will or choice about how to conduct ourselves in the world.

At the end of the 19th century, Theodore Herzl, who laid the foundation for the Zionist movement, used the word *im*, “if,” to powerful and enduring effect. Of the idea of a Jewish return to Palestine he said:

“Im tirtzu, ain zo agadah—If you will it, it is no legend.”



--What will you do with your gift of free will? If, like Herzl, you choose to promote the Jewish State, you might want to get involved with charitable work or activism for Israel. To get you started, you can find a list of organizations that need your help at

www.israelfairs.org

--You may wish to start your Israel activism closer to home. Whenever possible, consider buying products made in Israel. Also, encourage your local merchants to carry them. You can find a comprehensive list of these products at

www.israeliproducts.com

--You might also want to become familiar with the prayer for the State of Israel.. The prayer *Avinu She-bashamayim*, was composed in 1948 after the modern state of was established and is said on Shabbat and Festivals before the Torah scroll is returned to the ark:

Avinu She-bashamayim, Rock and Redeemer of the people Israel: Bless the State of Israel, with its promise of redemption. Shield it with Your love; spread over it the shelter of Your peace. Guide its leaders and advisors with Your light and Your truth. Help them with Your good counsel. Strengthen the hands of those who defend our Holy Land. Deliver them; crown their efforts with triumph. Bless the Land with peace, and its inhabitants with lasting joy. And let us say: Amen. (Translation from Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals)



Shabbat Shalom

Please join together in learning with other families by sharing your family's discussions and ideas by posting them on our web site.

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