

Developing a Fear of HaShem

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Parashat Bechukotai

Does the Tora prefer negative as opposed to positive reinforcement?

The series of **rebukes** in Parashat BeChukotai are certainly enough to give anyone pause.¹ It is notable that whereas the Parasha **begins** with promises of **reward** in return for compliance with the Mitzvot of the Tora (VaYikra 26:3-13), the overwhelming **majority** of the verses in Bechukotai (26:14-46) concerned with reward and punishment² deal with the dire **warnings** of the consequences of non-observance. If we take the model of the Tenai Kaful³ (the doubled condition) as a template, we would expect that equal attention would be paid to both of these possibilities, i.e., what type of result can be expected when the Jews are loyal to HaShem and His Tora, and equal treatment regarding what, Chas VeShalom, will occur if they are not. However, from the structure of Parashat BeChukotai, a reader comes away with the impression, based upon the respective quantities of verses devoted to rewards and punishments, that the Tora views negative reinforcement, i.e., the threats of **frightening**

¹ R. Joseph Lookstein, ZaTzaL, was fond of pointing out that the custom to read the verses of the Tochecha (rebuke) in the books of VaYikra and Devarim quickly and in a low voice, made no sense to him. If the intent is to **intimidate** people into obeying Jewish law under threat of catastrophic consequences, these verses should consequently be read all the more slowly and loudly in order to make a deep impression upon all those listening. (Bi'ur Halacha on Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 428 notes with dismay that some communities were so disconcerted by the Tochecha, that they would simply skip the Tora reading for that Shabbat, rather than running the risk of invoking the series of curses by merely reading them! A number of Halachic decisors discuss the protocol regarding who should be given the Aliya during which these verses are read, since it might appear that such an individual has been singled out by the congregation for public humiliation.)

² A third section of the Parasha, 27:1-33 describes laws associated with making donations to the Tabernacle/Temple and, in certain cases, their redemption from a state of dedicated holiness. The interconnection between the Tochecha (rebuke) and these final verses in BeChukotai is certainly not readily apparent.

³ In BaMidbar 32, Reuven, Gad, and half of the tribe of Menashe negotiate with Moshe, and through him, with HaShem, to be allowed to take over the lands of Sichon and Og, which are located outside of Canaan, on the other side of the Jordan River. When Moshe presents the final proposal to these 2 ½ tribes, he is careful to spell out both sides of the bargain:

32:20-23

...**If you do** this thing, i.e., **if** you place yourselves in the forefront before HaShem for war (that will be required in order to conquer the Canaanite lands upon which the rest of the Jewish people will live),

And all of you will go armed before HaShem across the Jordan, until He has Driven out His Enemies from before Him,

And the land is subdued before HaShem, **then** afterwards you shall return, and be guiltless before the Lord and Israel, and this land shall be to you for a possession before HaShem.

But if you will not do so, behold you have sinned before HaShem, and your sin will find you out (i.e., there will be consequences as a result of your non-compliance with the Lord's Wishes).

consequences, as **more central** and therefore persuasive and effective than positive urgings and inducements.⁴

Comparing the introductory verses of the two sections of the Tochecha.

In addition to the notable difference in the quantity of verses of Parashat BeChukotai devoted to rewards in contrast to punishments, a specific literary example of the more extreme concern regarding potential transgressions than possible Mitzva performance is evident from a comparison of the introductory verses for each of these sections of the Parsha. The “lead-in” to the passages discussing rewards is fairly straightforward and devoid of emotion:

VaYikra 26:3

If you walk in My Statutes, and observe My Commandments, and do them...

When further along in chapter 26 we come to the verse that marks the Tora’s beginning to consider possible punishments incurred by transgressors of the Commandments, the change in emphasis due to the addition of words indicating deep-seated feelings is striking:

VaYikra 26:14-15

But if you **will not listen** to Me, and will not do all of these Commandments, and if you will **despise** My Statutes, and if your soul **abhors** My Judgements, so that you will not do all of My Commandments, but that you **break** My Covenant,...

Accounting for the extra introductory language by positing subcategories within the section of threats in the Tochecha.

RaShI, based upon Torat Kohanim (Midrash Halacha on VaYikra) explains that the series of additional phrases in 26:14-15 represent seven graduated steps describing an individual’s increasing alienation from a life of Mitzva observance as s/he falls ever further down the “slippery slope” into sin and denial.

Failure to study Tora (“Lo Tishme’u Li”) →

Failure to perform the Commandments (“VeLo Ta’asu”) →

Disrespect for others who do observe the Commandments (“BeChukotai Timasu”) →

Hatred for Tora scholars (“Mishpatai Tigal Nafshechem”)⁵ →

Preventing others from observing the Tora (“LeVilti Asot”)⁶ →

⁴A similar conclusion can be reached when considering the other Parasha of the Tora in which Tochecha appears in extended form, **Parashat Ki Tavo**. Firstly, when the Tora describes the ritual blessing and cursing of the people on the mountains of Grizim and Eival in verses **27:11-26**, although we are led to believe in verses 12 and 13 that equal statements were made for both the positive and negative possibilities, **only the curses** are recorded in verses 15-26. Then, when in chapter 28 the details of the consequences of either keeping or transgressing the Commandments are listed, verses 1-14 are devoted to the rewards, while **15-68 (!)** convey the punishments.

⁵ In this instance it will have to be acknowledged that the relationship between the biblical text and the conclusion drawn by the commentators is somewhat tenuous. In order to explain Sifra and RaShI one would have to maintain that since it is the scholars who typically promulgate the law and urge compliance with it, a disrespect for the law will ultimately lead to disrespecting the scholars who advocate for its observance.

Deny that the Tora was Divinely Revealed (“Kol Mitzvotai”)⁷ →
Deny that God Exists, (KaVeYachol) (LeHafrechem Et Briti).

Assuming that RaShI’s interpretation has merit, couldn’t a similar sequence have been suggested by the Tora with respect to **increased** Mitzva observance, in accordance with the principle of Ben Azai in Avot 4:2, Mitzva Goreret Mitzva (the performance of one Commandment leads to the performance of another)? Here for example is an eleven step system for **increased** holiness and fulfillment of God’s Will that is found in the Oral Tradition:

Avoda Zora 20b

R. Pinchas ben Yair said: Tora study brings one to heedfulness; heedfulness brings one to diligence; diligence brings one to moral cleanliness; moral cleanliness brings one to asceticism; asceticism brings one to purity; purity brings one to piety; piety brings one to humility; humility brings one to **fear of sin**; fear of sin brings one to holiness; holiness brings one to Divine Inspiration; Divine Inspiration brings one to the resurrection of the dead.

Considering the concept of “Fear of God” in various Tora contexts.

To attempt to understand the place of the type of Yirat HaShem focusing upon preventing transgressions by means of powerful threats and gut-wrenching fear as in the Tochecha, within the greater context of the Mitzvot of the Tora in general, it is necessary to consider other examples of biblical “fear of God”.

In VaYikra 19, at the conclusion of a number of verses containing various Commandments designed to insure that people treat one another properly,⁸ the phrase, “and you will fear your God” appears. RaShI⁹ on 19:14 suggests that the common denominator for the Commandments with which this phrase is specifically associated, is that in each of these cases it is difficult to be able to discern the true intentions of the individual who may or may not be in violation of the rules in question. Did s/he really mean to take advantage of someone who is handicapped, or was it simply an innocent error? Was an individual disrespectful of someone who is older or otherwise vulnerable, or was the offensive banter simply meant to be playful

⁶ The case on behalf of this interpretation can be made more easily than in the previous instance (see fn. 5). Since verse 14 has already included a phrase that lends itself to being understood as indicating non-performance of Commandments, a repetition of such a concept in verse 15 per force should be attributed to a new aspect of the individual’s sinfulness, i.e., being involved in encouraging others to ignore the Commandments. Such a level of transgression is represented by Yiravam ben Navat, who by setting up his own system of holidays, temples and idols, not only himself sinned, but caused others to sin as well, thereby earning for him the sobriquet, Choteh U’Machti (the sinner and the causer of others to sin).

⁷ The interpretation keys upon the use of the personal pronoun in the word Mitzvotai—the individual contends that rather than these Commandments originating from God as traditional thought would maintain, they are man-made, and therefore non-binding.

⁸ VaYikra 19:14 Do not curse the deaf and do not place a stumbling block in front of the blind.

“ 19:32 Stand before the aged and respect the individual who is elderly.

“ 25:17 Do not verbally oppress your fellow.

“ 25:36 Do not accept interest in return for a loan.

“ 25:43 Do not assign inappropriate work to a Jewish servant.

⁹ See R. David Tzvi Hoffmann’s alternate approach to the extra language at the end of a number of verses in that Parasha in his comment to VaYikra 19:32.

and a misguided attempt at humor? Consequently, “fearing God” in this context will hopefully make a person realize that even if he manages to impress everyone around him that no harm was intended, he will ultimately be accountable to the Bochein Levavot (the Discerner of what one harbors within his heart). While the development of this type of God-fearingness, reminiscent of R. Akiva’s comment in Avot 3:16,¹⁰ will hopefully serve as a deterrent to improper behavior, it appears to reflect a more general, relatively amorphous attitude rather than taking the form of the clear-cut threats encountered in the Tochecha. Are the Tochecha-type threats reserved for only the most overt, reprehensible sins like idolatry, murder, promiscuity, as opposed to more subtle transgressions, exemplified by VaYikra 19?

Another series of verses, specifically found in Devarim, seem to employ the concept of “fear of God” in a manner distinct from both the Tochecha of Bechukotai and Ki Tavo, as well as the verses in VaYikra 19 mentioned above. In Devarim 6:2, 13; 10:20; and 13:5¹¹ Yirat HaShem suggests a particular form of compliance with Mitzvot—RaMBaN interprets the phrase to connote being careful not to violate negative prohibitions, while Ibn Ezra writes that the “fear of God” is reflected by one not questioning the reasons for the Commandments which he has to carry out—comparable to the other types of observances listed in these particular verses (see fn. 10), rather than a catalyst by which one will be forced to observe the tradition, as presented in the Tochecha. In this context, it appears that Yirat HaShem is either part of Mitzva fulfillment, or comes about as a result of such practices, rather than serving as a reason to perform Mitzvot and avoid Aveirot in the first place

When Avraham demonstrates that he is ready to obey God to the point of sacrificing his son Yitzchak, he is told, (Beraishit 22:12) “...Now I Know that you are a **fearer of God...**” Avraham does not seem to comply with the Divine Command because he is “afraid” to do otherwise. His motivation looks like it originates from his desire to please HaShem, rather than from some perceived danger to himself or his family, unstated or not.

¹⁰ ...The store is open, the storekeeper is giving credit, the ledger is open, the and is writing, whomever wishes to borrow may come and do so, and the collectors go about their business daily, collecting debts from people both with and without their knowledge, all the while basing their collections upon solid evidence.

¹¹ **Devarim 6:1-2**

And this is the Mitzva, the statutes and the laws that the Lord your God Commanded to teach you to do in the land that you are crossing over there to inherit it. In order that you will **fear** the Lord your God, to observe all of His Statutes and Commandments that I am commanding you and your children and your grandchildren all the days of your life and in order that you will lengthen your days.

Devarim 6:12-13

Be careful lest you forget the Lord your God Who Took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of bondage. The Lord your God you should **fear** and Him you should serve, and by His Name you should swear.

Devarim 10:20

The Lord your God you should **fear** and Him you should serve, and to Him you should cling and by His Name you should swear.

Devarim 13:5

You should go after the Lord your God and Him you should **fear** and His Commandments you should observe and to His Voice you should listen, and Him you should serve, and to Him you should cling.

It is also notable that those serving as **judges**, and therefore focusing upon enforcing and adjudicating issues between man and man, are expected to be ultimately answerable to HaShem by means of a sense of **fear** of and responsibility to the Divine. The personal attributes delineated by Yitro for the type of individual to whom Moshe ought to delegate some of his judicial responsibilities in order that the Jewish encampment function more smoothly and efficiently, includes (Shemot 18:21) Yirai Elokim (fearers of God).¹² Yitro apparently assumes that only when the power that one holds over another, as embodied by members of the judiciary, is tempered by accountability to an Omniscient and Omnipresent Being, can there be confidence that the trial will be conducted fairly and honestly. But must the judge be terrified lest he make a mistake? Such an implication does not spring forth from the verses in the Tora dealing with those who sit on Jewish courts.¹³

The closest parallel to the type of “fear of HaShem” underlying the Tochecha is the mass experience undergone by the Jewish people at **Sinai**, an experience that was at least in part intended to strike the visceral fear of Heaven into the hearts of the entire nation.¹⁴ Following the declaration of the Ten Commandments, God’s Goal regarding the manner in which He had just Revealed Himself on Sinai is explained by Moshe to a delegation of Jews. These individuals had taken it upon themselves to approach Moshe in order to ask that the people be spared any further direct exposure to the Divine Presence because the Sinai experience had proven just too traumatic for the average person. In response to their plaint, Moshe tells them, (Shemot 20:16) “...Do not be frightened (by the thunder, lightning, thick smoke, Shofar blasts, etc. listed in Shemot 19:18-19) because God has Come merely to test you, and so that His **Fear** be upon your faces, thereby encouraging you to refrain from sinning.” This conversation between Moshe and the people at Sinai is recapitulated and expanded upon in Devarim 5:19-24, culminating in HaShem Himself Approving of the people’s proposal to have Moshe serve as an intermediary between themselves and HaShem for all future Revelations.

Devarim 5:25-26

And the Lord Heard your words when you spoke to me, and the Lord Said to me,
“I have Heard the words of the people that they have spoken to you. They have well said all that they have spoken.

¹² It is notable that in Devarim 1:13, when the idea to add additional levels of judges is recapitulated and the actual individuals who were chosen for these roles are described, the phrase Yirai Elokim is omitted. While RaMBaN in his commentary on 1:13 suggests that the phrase VeYedu’im LeShivteichem (and known to your tribes) includes the attribute of “God-Fearingness”, this is not compelling. Assuming that individuals with this particular attribute were sought after, but in the end could not be located suggests that this type of religious and moral attribute is hardly common, and in fact difficult to come by, regardless of the Revelations that one has experienced, or the deeply held beliefs that one entertains.

¹³ In the case of judges, it is notable that in Tora SheB’Al Peh, the type of threats that are made in the Tochecha, are applied at least metaphysically to those sitting in judgment of others, e.g., Sanhedrin 7a— Said R. Yonatan: A judge should always view himself as if a sword has been placed between his loins and Gehinnom is open beneath him.

¹⁴ The unfortunate failure of this plan to elicit the permanent sense of deference to and faith in the Divine subsequent to the Exodus and the receiving of the Tora, is evidenced by the sin of the Golden Calf and the subsequent additional transgressions of the Jews en masse with respect to, e.g., the demand for meat, the popular support for the challenge of Moshe’s authority in terms of his objectivity in appointing Aharon High Priest, the inordinate weeping by the people following the report of the spies regarding the impregnability of Canaan, and the incessant grumbling regarding the limitations on drinking water.

Oh if only there were always such a heart in them that they will **fear** Me and keep all My Commandments always, that it might be well with them and with their children forever.”

It is apparently assumed that someone who experiences genuine fear and even dread in the presence of HaShem, would be loath to consider transgressing negative Commandments and/or avoiding carrying out positive Commandments from that point onwards.

Could the call to remember the experience at Sinai have more to do with the fright that the people felt rather than the contents of the Revelation itself?

Could remembering and reinforcing such a sense of Divine fear so that the laws of Judaism be preserved in the years to come serve as the basis for the call in the Tora some forty years later¹⁵ to constantly remember Sinai and what we experienced there as a nascent nation?

Devarim 4:9-11

Be exceedingly careful and guard your souls very much, lest you forget the things that your eyes saw, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life. And you will make them known to your children and your children’s children.

The day upon which you stood before the Lord your God on Chorev (an alternate name for Sinai) when HaShem Said to me, “Gather for Me the nations, and I will Cause them to hear My Words in order that they learn to **fear** Me all of the days that they are living on the earth, and their children they must teach. And you approached and you stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain was consumed in **fire** rising up to the heart of Heaven, **darkness**, **cloud** and **thick fog**.

Not only are we urged to try to imagine what the Sinai experience was like and thereby come to a modicum of fear of the Divine by means of such an imaginative exercise, but the Mitzva of **HaKhel** (gathering) would seem to be a symbolic reenactment of Sinai with a similar goal of instilling fear in the assembled masses in mind. While an important feature of this Mitzva, at least according to Sota 7:8, is the requirement for the Jewish king to conduct a public Tora reading, demonstrating his own subservience to the Tora, as far as the simple meaning of the relevant Biblical text is concerned, the focus of this ritual was a specific desired emotional effect upon the people who constituted this ritual’s onlookers, with particular mention made of those who had never previously experienced such an event.

Devarim 31:10-13

...At the end of a seven year period, during the Festival at the conclusion of the Sabbatical Year, the Festival of Sukkot.

¹⁵ Sefer Devarim is comprised for the most part of Moshe’s valedictory address to the people just before he dies. Therefore a reference to Sinai in Devarim is taking place approximately four decades after the event itself actually took place. Furthermore, in light of the deaths of most of the generation of the Exodus from Egypt during the forty years of wandering, a good percentage, if not the overwhelming majority of those standing before Moshe and listening to his words were not even born at the time of the giving of the Tora at Sinai.

When all of Israel comes to appear before the Face of the Lord your God in the place that He will Choose, read this Tora in the presence of all of Israel in a manner so that they will hear.

Gather together the people, the men, the women and the children, as well as your sojourner in your gates, in order that they will hear and in order that they will learn and they will **fear** the Lord your God and observe to do all of the words of this Tora.

And their children that did not know (these matters previously) will listen and learn to fear the Lord your God all of the days that you live on the land which you are crossing the Jordan there to inherit it.

Is the emphasis on engendering fear of the Divine a device to try to encourage moral and ethical behavior on the part of the people?

Is the Tora to be understood by its inordinate emphasis upon threats and punishments at Sinai and in the Tochecha, occasions when the entire nation rather than only a few special individuals who have been chosen for leadership within the society are addressed, as attributing to general human nature a more powerful desire to transgress prohibitions, than to comply with positive Divine Direction; to enjoy short-term prohibited pleasures in favor of long-term spiritual development and ultimate perfection? Is it to be assumed based on biblical passages such as the Tochecha that the same human weakness that is first evidenced in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve cannot resist eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil even after having been clearly instructed by HaShem not to do so (Beraishit 2:16-17; 3:6) will always be very much with the overwhelming majority of us? Yet more discouraging is the realization that we as a people appear to have learned little from our past; the Tochechot include among the dire threats numerous references to the Jewish people's being exiled from their homeland,¹⁶ a fate that indeed befell Adam and Eve, as well as the Jewish people down through its history. Yet due to our inherent spiritual and moral weaknesses, we have sinned and been exiled countless times since the founding of our people. Suddenly, in light of Jewish history, the threats in BeChukotai and Ki Tavo are not merely conditional, i.e., they **may** take place, but certainly can be prevented. On the contrary, if human nature is portrayed as excessively stubborn, then the punishments of the Tochecha become **inevitable**, however much free choice we have been granted in theory.

Is emphasis on the negative in the Tochecha a requisite first step in the process of achieving ever-greater holiness?

However, an alternate explanation for BeChukotai's apparent disproportionate emphasis upon threatened punishment as the result of sin as opposed to reward for Mitzva performance, could argue that the path to **spirituality** must **begin** by (as opposed to exclusively focus upon) **desisting** from **negative**, destructive actions. A well-known biblical phrase to this effect appears in Tehillim 34:15 and 37:27—Sur MeiRa VeAseh Tov (turn away from evil and **[only then]** do good). A Talmudic parable that illustrates the logic inherent in such a principle appears in Ta'anit 16a.

Said R. Ada bar Ahava: An individual who "has in his hand" (who regularly transgresses) a sin, confesses regarding it, but does not change his ways, to what is he to be compared? To someone who is grasping a ritually impure object

¹⁶ VaYikra 26:33-38; Devarim 28:36 ff., 64 ff.

in his hand, and therefore even if he immerses himself in all of the waters of the universe, the immersion will not result in his ritual purification. Only upon his casting the offending object away, then even if he immerses in only 40 Sa'ahs of water (the minimum amount of water needed for a Mikva), the immersion immediately changes his/her status...

Therefore perhaps a reason for deemphasizing the rewards of Mitzva performance might be because fulfilling Commandments will become relatively easy, once the "heavy lifting" of repenting from incorrect actions is achieved.

Which interpretation appeals more to your sensibilities? To what sort of person do you think the Tora is directing the Tochecha—to everyone? To certain individuals? I would certainly be interested in learning of your approaches to this issue.