

## If You Follow My Laws

Time and again, the Torah beggars belief. A forty-day flood that covers the earth. An interpreter of dreams who rises from prison to power. A talking donkey who sees the angel unnoticed by human eyes. Yet it may be this week's *parashah* that asks of our credulity too much.

אִם־בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ, "If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit. ... I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled. ... I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people" (Lev. 26:3-12, excerpts).

On its surface, this passage seems to tell of the fairytale God of Vending Machines. Insert the coin of righteous behavior, and out come innumerable, even supernatural, blessings.

And the chapter goes on to show the other side of the coin as well.

וְאִם־רִבֵּיתֶם אֶת־חֻקֹּתַי וְשָׂאתֶם אֶת־בְּרִיתִי, "But if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant, ... I will wreak misery upon you – consumption and fever, which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish; you shall sow your seed to no purpose, for your enemies shall eat it" (Lev. 26:15-16). Indeed, on a day like today, following the horrific murders of Yaron Lischinsky and Sarah Lynn Milgrim in Washington, D.C., we read with especially acute pain: "you shall be routed by your enemies, and your foes shall dominate you" (Lev. 26:17). The message seems plain, and offensive at that: Do good to get good, and prepare for calamity if you do wrong.

Modern thinkers have rejected this quid-pro-quo for centuries. Leo Baeck, a Reform rabbi who would later lead the Jewish community of Nazi-controlled Germany, wrote in 1905:

The Hebrew Bible, when it speaks, as it frequently and emphatically does, of the punishment of sin, and of the reward of piety, speaks of tangible and earthly rewards and punishments. In the history of the education of the Jewish people this immaturity had its need and its value. ... [However], the entire religious literature of the Middle Ages ...

unanimously states that only a deed intended and carried out for its own sake is to be esteemed as a good deed.<sup>1</sup>

In other words, the nascent People of Israel needed carrots and sticks to do what's right; but as our religion evolved, we shed the crass equivalencies of ancient supernaturalism and discerned higher and nobler motivations for a life of goodness.

It is surely true—or at least I believe it to be so—that our people has matured in our morals and philosophy. And yet, there is more to the Torah's pronouncements of blessing and curse than meets the eye.

So we look one chapter earlier to see the context for this long divine speech: וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה בְּהַר סִינַי, "The Eternal spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai" (Lev. 25:1). And at the end of the chapter, again, we read: "These are the laws, rules, and instructions that the Eternal established, through Moses on Mount Sinai, between God and the People of Israel" (Lev. 26:46). The narration places us on Mount Sinai, overhearing a conversation between Moses and God.

And yet, these laws and rules, these blessings and curses, are spoken directly to the people. וּפָנִיתִי אֲלֵיכֶם, "I will turn my face toward you" (Lev. 26:9) or וְנִתַּתִּי פָנַי בְּכֶם, "I will set my face against you" (Lev. 26:17). Indeed, אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, "I the Eternal am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect" (Lev. 26:13). In these verses, God speaks not to Moses but to the Hebrews; and not only those standing at the base of the proverbial mountain but also those who allow ourselves to be addressed by this text generation after generation. *We* are God's *you*, established as a people in common covenant with God through the power of scriptural text.

Maybe our ancestors believed that if they worked together, taking responsible collective action to honor God and walk in God's ways, then the earth would yield its bounty and their enemies would fall before them. And maybe they believed that if their nation descended into malice and greed, then they would face poetic justice delivered from Heaven above. But even if they did accept these notions in a fairly straightforward way, then they would also have believed the theological climax of this otherwise troubling chapter:

"Those of you who survive ... shall atone for their iniquity. Then will I remember My covenant ... and I will not reject them or spurn them ... for I the Eternal am their God" (Lev. 26:39-44, excerpts).

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<sup>1</sup> *The Essence of Judaism*, p. 183. English translation by Victor Grubwieser and Leonard Pearl and published in 1936. Available online: [https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.215950/2015.215950.The-Essence\\_djvu.txt](https://archive.org/stream/in.ernet.dli.2015.215950/2015.215950.The-Essence_djvu.txt).

As in so many biblical pronouncements of doom, the devastation of Israel is never complete. God promises justice, including delivering punishment to our own people when we have forsaken God's laws – but in the end, God's mercy wins out. Jewish history has shown that, for reasons we can discern and for those that defy understanding, our people time and again approach the brink of death. Yet we always survive. A remnant clings to hope, and the divine promise of redemption finds its way through hardship and loss.

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Modernity demands we acknowledge: nature does not respond to human morality or the lack thereof. But this passage offers us far more than a simplistic view of punishment and reward. It gives voice to a divine spirit that calls to us through the ages, uniting us with our ancestors and with generations to come and inviting us to imagine ourselves into a community based on shared aspirations of goodness and peace. The sophistication we've gained through millennia of study allows us to appreciate the prominent themes of atonement and law as well as more subtle nuances like the mode and form of address. To affirm Torah as holy is to reject oversimplification or caricature, seeing instead both the humanity of the text as well as its sacredness.

The Book of Leviticus concludes, "These are the commandments that the Eternal gave Moses for the people of Israel on Mount Sinai" (Lev. 27:34). We are that people, and we stand at that mountain. May our acceptance of Torah lead us to blessing, and may we know the promise of the Eternal: "I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land" (Lev. 26:6).