

Reading Bechukotai makes me tired. Not just sleepy, but existentially exhausted.

Bechukotai is a parashah that is deeply committed to the significance of human action and inaction. Perhaps individually, we may not deserve our blessings or curses, but on a societal level, there is no randomness in the theology of Bechukotai. Live in right relationship with the land, feed the hungry, act with justice, the parashah promises, and we will be blessed with superabundance: rain when we need it, bumper harvests, and confidence against our enemies. There will be physical riches, as in verse 10: You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new – meaning, Or HaChaim says, the our grain will be secure enough in its storage to improve with age, and so abundant that we'll only discard it because all of our storage houses overflow with new grain. There will also be spiritual riches, as in the following verses – that We will feel the presence of Hashem dwelling among us.

But fail in these regards, fail to keep the sabbatical/seven year cycles, the yovel/jubilee 49 year cycles, fail to be good guests on the land, and we'll get a mockery of the cycles of blessings: rebuke and punishment that, the parashah promises first in verse 18, then in verses, 21, 24, 28, if even after these punishments you do not obey me, I will go on and smite you sevenfold for your sins.

What strikes me about the punishments is not just horror of hunger and war, but the psychological punishments that are part of it.

In Chapter 26, verse 26, for example, the threat is, “When I break your staff of bread, ten women shall bake your bread in a single oven; they shall dole out your bread by weight, and though you eat, you shall not be satisfied.” There's a very specific, tangible curse here – food scarcity. But at the end of the verse, there is the psychological residue: even when you *do* eat – you will not be satisfied. Rashi teaches that this refers to a curse in the intestines. Chizkuni suggests that this curse is the inverse of a blessing offered back in verse 10 that you will eat from grain long held in storage.

Similarly, verse 36 and 37 threaten:

As for those of you who survive, I will cast a faintness into their hearts in the land of their enemies. The sound of a driven leaf shall put them to flight. Fleeing as though from the sword, they shall fall though none pursues. With no one pursuing, they shall stumble over one another as before the sword. You shall not be able to stand your ground before your enemies.

There is a threat of real war and violence; but then there is also the explicit threat of the lingering trauma – the inability to trust that we are ever safe. The fear of the threat, as much a curse as the threat itself. In this week's d'var Torah from the Jewish Orthodox Feminist alliance, this curse is referred to in the words of the late Talmudic scholar Adin Steinsaltz as “existential anxiety.”

The author of the JOFA dvar contrasts that anxiety, with the promise of storing up old grain, with the ability to think long-term.

And I don't know how to talk about this without either slipping into cliches or into exhaustion. We are so far from right relationship with the land – either the land of Israel, or any land. And we are in that compounding punishment: where there is real threat, real violence and conspiracy theorizing. October 7th happened, more than half of the hostages are still in Gaza and protesters around the world call to “globalize the intifada,” and “resistance by any means necessary.”

And:: We run even when no one is pursuing. Our Jewish tendency to lash at out anyone who questions Israel's actions, who questions the assault on Rafah as the best tool for stopping terrorism. Our desire to hide our faces from the abuses by our fellow Jews in the West Bank, to deny and deflect any claim that maybe the IDF isn't quite as careful about civilian lives as we want to insist that is; our desire to claim all the humanity for our own side and all the atrocity for the other – these too, are the curses, reverberating, sevenfold. What are we if we aren't innocent victims?

Here we are, as the passages foretells, scattered to further ends of the earth, literally, than our biblical ancestors could have imagined existed. Feeling vulnerable, sighing over the land of Israel, our bread heavy in our stomachs, indigestible as the children of Gaza starve, as the fruits on the border rot with no one to pick them. Even when we eat, we are not satisfied. How could we be?

It will be a long way back.

And yet, Torah foretells that too. The book of Vayikra doesn't leave us there, in the trauma. Hashem doesn't leave us there. When we go into exile, the divine presence is exiled with us. Hashem promises at the end of this exhausting chapter – literally and metaphorically – that the covenant is still in force. Which means we can do better. We can learn to bear our ancestral traumas without inflicting them on others. We can learn to only run when someone is chasing us, and when to stop running, when to listen, and be in conversation. It will start with opening our hearts – with breaking our hearts.

Back in 2020, in preparation for the election, I remember being on a webinar where Rabbi David Stern said something really powerful. He said 'we need to heal. And healing isn't the same thing as palliative care. Healing hurts.'

With that, I'd like to share an excerpt from a poem distributed this week by my colleague, Rabbi Ariel tov-Lev, who writes, "I've been having this problem where lately, when I show empathy for one group, I'm accused of having no empathy for another. I have been told I have no empathy for the hostages because I've expressed empathy for those in Rafah. I've been told I have no empathy for Palestinians because I've expressed empathy for the hostages. But. . . Our hearts can break for more than one people, and there is hope in the heartbreak."

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empathy is not an exhaustible resource
although it is at times exhausting
we are our only limiting factor

the heart is never so open
as when it is broken
let it break, let it break

May we have the strength to feel our broken hearts. Chazak chazak,
v'nitchazek. Be strong, be strong and strengthen each other.