

Parashat BECHUKOTAI

The Third Tablets

By Rav Meir Spiegelman

There are a number of parashiot in the Torah which parallel, in a certain sense, the Ten Commandments. Clearly, the most obvious example is parashat Kedoshim, and both earlier and later commentators note this. In Kedoshim, several of the Ten Commandments are paralleled in full (such as honoring parents and Shabbat), while others find only a partial repetition (such as the prohibition, "You shall not stand idly by your neighbor's blood" as opposed to "You shall not steal [i.e. kidnap]"). In this shiur, I shall accept this parallel as a given, and attempt to understand its significance and the connection between it and our parasha.

BOUNDARIES OF THE PARALLEL

Before discussing the parallel itself, we must first examine its boundaries. In other words, where does the literary unit containing the "Ten Commandments" begin, and where does it end?

Firstly, it is clear that the unit corresponding to the Ten Commandments does not begin before chapter 18. Most of the commands in the first section of Sefer Vayikra pertain to the Mishkan, and are addressed to Aharon. Starting from chapter 18, the commands do not necessarily relate only to the Mishkan, and they are conveyed to Moshe. (Even when the commands are addressed to the kohanim, Moshe receives the command from God and passes it on to Aharon.) Indeed, the opening verses of chapter 18 represent a classic introduction to a new section:

"God spoke to Moshe, saying:

Speak to Bnei Yisrael and say to them: I am the Lord your God. You shall not follow the customs of the land of Egypt, where you dwelled, nor shall you follow the customs of the land of Canaan to which I bring you, nor shall you walk in their statutes. You shall fulfill My laws and observe My statutes, to walk in them – I am the Lord your God. And you shall observe My statutes and My laws, which – if a person follows them – he shall live; I am the Lord." (Vayikra 18:1-5)

Moreover, these verses also echo the continuation of parashat Kedoshim (for example, 20:22).

In contrast to the beginning of the section, which is easy enough to identify, the conclusion is more difficult to locate. The end of chapter 20 would seem a suitable place to conclude the section, for this chapter ends with concluding verses reminiscent of the beginning of parashat Kedoshim (and they are followed immediately by the start of a section meant only for kohanim):

"And you shall keep all My statutes and all My laws, and fulfill them, that you may not be expelled by the land to which I bring you, to dwell in it. You shall not follow the statutes of the nation which I cast out from before you, for they did all this and

I have detested them... You shall be holy unto Me for I, the Lord, am holy, and I have separated you from the nations to be Mine." (Vayikra 20:22-26)

Despite all this, it appears that the unit corresponding to the Ten Commandments concludes not at the end of parashat Kedoshim, but rather much later on. The opening verses of parashat Behar connect us directly to the Revelation at Sinai, and the verses concluding this parasha complete the parallel to the beginning of parashat Kedoshim and to the Ten Commandments:[1]

"For Bnei Yisrael are Mine as servants; they are My servants whom I took out of the land of Egypt, I am the Lord your God. You shall not make for yourselves pagan gods, nor shall you build for yourselves an idol or a statue, nor shall you place a carved stone in your land to bow down upon it, for I am the Lord your God. You shall observe My shabbatot and you shall revere My Sanctuary; I am the Lord." (Vayikra 25:55-26:2)

However, it would seem that the end of parashat Behar is also not the end of the unit parallel to the Ten Commandments; rather, the unit concludes either in the middle of Behar or at the end of parashat Bechukotai. I arrive at this conclusion based on the fact that after the conclusion of the curses (as well as at the end of the parasha), the Torah explicitly closes the framework that opened at the beginning of parashat Kedoshim:

"These are the statutes and the laws and the teachings that God placed between Himself and Bnei Yisrael at Mt. Sinai by the hand of Moshe." (Vayikra 27:34)

In summary, we may say that there is a large unit of chapters – starting at the beginning of parashat Kedoshim (or a little before then) and concluding at the end of Sefer Vayikra – that corresponds, in its entirety, to the Ten Commandments and the parashiot that follow. In fact, since the Torah states that this unit was conveyed to Moshe at Mt. Sinai, the parallel is obviously not incidental; rather, this unit is conveying a different formulation of the Ten Commandments told to Moshe at Sinai.

Two questions now arise: firstly, why does the Torah repeat the Ten Commandments once again in these parashiot; and secondly, why is the formulation of the Ten Commandments here different from the one we find in parashat Yitro and in parashat Va-etchanan?

FOLLOWING THE SIN OF THE GOLDEN CALF

In order to answer these two questions, we must return to the Revelation at Sinai and the sin of the golden calf. The impression that arises from Chazal's description of Moshe's ascents and descents of the mountain may be misleading: we imagine that Moshe came down from the mountain, then – after a short time – ascended once again, and Am Yisrael received the second Tablets after just one hundred and twenty days. This description does match the historical facts, but does not present reality as it appeared at the time.

When Moshe descended Mt. Sinai for the second time, after praying to God to forgive the nation, the future looked quite gloomy to Bnei Yisrael. The most blatant signs of their situation were the fact that the Ohel Mo'ed now stood outside the camp, and that God stated that He would not dwell amidst the nation. In general, we are accustomed to thinking that Moshe's words to God, "See – You tell me, Bring up this nation," were uttered as part of his prayer on behalf of Am Yisrael, but this is not necessarily so. God did not completely forgive the nation

following Moshe's prayer, and Bnei Yisrael were left in a sort of interim situation, in which God was not prepared to go on amongst them. Had Moshe not prayed once again on their behalf, this situation would have continued. Only after Moshe prays a second time – "See – You tell me, Bring up this nation" – only then does God answer him, promising to go up amongst the nation.[2]

It appears that Moshe shattered the first Tablets for Bnei Yisrael's sake, since acceptance of the Tablets would represent agreement with their content. Moshe wanted to avoid the more serious punishment that would have been appropriate had they committed their sin concerning the golden calf while at the same time accepting the Tablets; therefore he broke them. The shattering of the Tablets expressed a situation in which, to Moshe's view, Am Yisrael was not worthy of receiving them. Therefore, the nation had to receive the Ten Commandments a second time – this time with their consent. Indeed, if we examine the text carefully, we note that in parashat Ki-Tisa, in the section describing the second Tablets, there are verses that are almost identical to those in parashat Mishpatim, describing the first Tablets. In fact, the subject of these two parashot is the two sets of Tablets.

THE THIRD TEN COMMANDMENTS

In light of the above explanation, we may ask what would happen had Moshe not beseeched God on behalf of Am Yisrael, or had his request – that the nation be completely forgiven – not been accepted, heaven forefend. On the face of it, it would seem that even then, God would have to forge a new covenant with Bnei Yisrael, now that the first Tablets had been broken. It is reasonable to assume that God would not have given a second set of Tablets, but some way would have been found to give Bnei Yisrael the Commandments that they had not agreed to accept the time.

It is possible that this is precisely the role of the unit beginning in parashat Kedoshim. Chazal teach that Moshe ascended Mt. Sinai three times, each time remaining there for forty days and forty nights. This is not stated explicitly in the Torah (although it may be hinted at in the verses in Sefer Devarim), but it seems that their teaching has its basis in our parasha. Since on two occasions Moshe ascended the mountain, remained there for forty days, and received a set of Tablets – it is logical to posit that the third time, too, he remained for forty days and received Torah. This third "receiving of the Torah" is what is described in the section under discussion, which begins with the giving of the Torah, continues with the three pilgrim festivals, and concludes with the forging of the covenant in parashat Bechukotai.[3] It appears that every time there was any change in the status of Bnei Yisrael, it became necessary for a new covenant to be made, which would reflect this change. In particular, following the sin of the golden calf, there was a need for the covenant of parashat Bechukotai, to reflect the catastrophic results of this sin.

THE COVENANT

What is a covenant? Simply put, a covenant is an agreement between two parties. Within the framework of the covenant in parashat Bechukotai, Am Yisrael was committed to observe the mitzvot, and God "committed" Himself to help them. A similar covenant appears in parashat Mishpatim: God gives Bnei Yisrael laws, statutes and commandments, and promises them reward for their fulfillment: "None shall miscarry nor be barren in your land; I shall fill the number of your days. I shall send the fear of Me before you..." (Shemot 20:3). The covenant of parashat

Mishpatim was forged through the sprinkling of blood and the nation's acceptance of the "contract" (the second set of Tablets).

The covenant in our parasha includes some elements that are very similar to those of the covenant in parashat Mishpatim. Bnei Yisrael receive the Commandments (in parashat Kedoshim), and then receive a collection of mitzvot including the three pilgrim festivals (parashat Emor) and the laws of damages. At the beginning of parashat Behar, the Torah takes us back to Mt. Sinai, in a parasha that includes the description of reward that is similar to the reward promised in parashat Mishpatim: "And the land shall give its fruit and you shall eat to satiety, and you shall dwell upon it in security" (Vayikra 25:19). Finally, at the end of the parasha, the Torah brings the obligations of both parties to the agreement: the parashiot of the blessing and the curse.[4]

However, despite the similarity, the covenant in parashat Bechukotai is substantially different from the one in parashat Mishpatim. Firstly, in parashat Mishpatim, God's commitment to help Am Yisrael is almost independent of their observance of the Torah,[5] while in parashat Bechukotai the condition is more manifest. Secondly, God's promises to Am Yisrael are given in parashat Mishpatim prior to the forging of the covenant (the sprinkling of the blood upon the nation), and prior to Bnei Yisrael's acceptance of the contract (the second Tablets). In parashat Bechukotai, in contrast, the two parties to the covenant are mentioned successively, and the fulfillment of the covenant is conditional upon the actions of Bnei Yisrael ("and I shall establish My covenant with you"). Thirdly, the covenant in parashat Mishpatim is not formulated in terms of "sin" and "punishment" (except for the warning not to sin), while in parashat Bechukotai the aspect of reward and punishment is more strongly emphasized.

Why is there such a great difference between these two covenants? It would seem that the difference is a result of the sin of the golden calf. Following this sin, a new covenant is required, including two possibilities: the possibility of reward, and the possibility of punishment, heaven forbid. Following the episode of the golden calf, the possibility of Bnei Yisrael sinning and being punished can no longer be ignored. Therefore, there is a clear correspondence between the "reward" in the covenant of Bechukotai and the covenant of parashat Mishpatim.

STRUCTURE OF THE PARASHIOT

In light of this explanation, we are left with another question: if the Commandments in our parasha were indeed given to Am Yisrael in between the first and the second Tablets, why does the Torah mention them only at the end of Sefer Vayikra? Why does this unit not appear in its natural place – at the beginning of parashat Ki-Tisa?

It would seem that the Torah wanted to preserve the continuity between the command to build the Mishkan and its execution. As I explained at length in the parashiot concerning the Mishkan, there are a number of differences between the structure of the Mishkan in Teruma-Tetzaveh and its structure in Vayakhel-Pekudei. The Torah seeks, on one hand, to emphasize these differences by juxtaposing the command to build the Mishkan and its fulfillment, while on the other hand teaching that despite these changes, the Mishkan that was ultimately built was a direct continuation of the Mishkan that was commanded. The sin of the golden calf is recorded in parashat Ki-Tisa, in the middle of the subject of the Mishkan, for it was the cause of the differences between the command and the execution.

FORMULATION OF THE COMMANDMENTS

If, indeed, the parashiot of Kedoshim, Behar and Bechukotai are a sort of "third set of Commandments," then why is there such a glaring difference between the formulation of this unit and the formulation of the first and second Tablets, in Yitro and Va-etchanan?

The scope of this shiur does not allow for a full treatment of the answer to this question, but I shall present briefly one possible direction. Attention should be paid to the fact that the reason that the Torah gives for the obligation of observing the mitzvot in parashat Kedoshim is different from the one offered in parashat Yitro. In parashat Kedoshim, we must observe the mitzvot because we are holy. At the giving of the Torah, in contrast, the concept of holiness is almost entirely absent.[6] In parashat Yitro, observance of the mitzvot is a function of the relationship between God and Am Yisrael ("You shall be chosen to Me from all the nations;" "You shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation;" etc.). In our parasha, God is distanced from Am Yisrael, and observance of the mitzvot is a result of sanctity and not relationship.

This explanation serves to solve another problem. At the beginning of our parasha, after God promises to shower Am Yisrael with all manner of blessings when they will be dwelling securely in their land, the Torah adds: "... and My soul shall not abhor you." Would anyone have thought that while God blesses the fruits of the ground and the nation, He abhors Am Yisrael?

In light of the above thesis, we have a way to understand this statement. As mentioned, the covenant of parashat Bechukotai was made in between the first and the second Tablets, while God was not dwelling amongst the nation. In this situation, God promises that the situation will return to what it was – "My soul shall not abhor you, and I shall walk in your midst and I shall be your God." As an aspiration for the future, God insists that even had Moshe not asked God to make His Presence dwell amongst the nation, if Am Yisrael would behave as they should – He would once again dwell amongst them.

NOTES:

[1] Chazal refer to this connection in their statement, "The ear that heard at Sinai: 'They are My servants,' not servants to servants..." – this verse, of course, is found at the end of parashat Behar.

[2] For our purposes, it makes no difference whether the monologue "See, You tell me..." was said during the forty days that Moshe spent atop Mt. Sinai or after these forty days.

[3] A number of covenants were made between God and Bnei Yisrael during the nation's sojourn in the wilderness. The Pesach sacrifice in Egypt was the first covenant; there was also the Revelation at Sinai and the covenant at the end of the forty years, and it is possible that there was one additional covenant.

[4] I hto address the difference between the covenant here and the covenant in parashat Ki-Tavo, as well as the differences between the blessings and the curses in both places, in a future shiur.

[5] Bnei Yisrael must obey the angel who walks before them, but this issue is of minor importance in comparison with the broader mention of it in parashat Bechukotai. Likewise, we may deduce from the fact that the Torah states that if Bnei Yisrael will serve God, He will help

them, that the converse is also true – if they do not serve Him, He will not help them; however, this is not stated here explicitly.

[6] There is a need for "sanctification" (hitkadshut) only in order to draw close to God: "Also the kohanim who approach towards God shall sanctify themselves, lest God break out among them." Elsewhere, too, holiness is mentioned as the definition of belonging to God: "You shall be holy people unto Me".

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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Yeshivat Har Etzion
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433
office@etzion.org.il