

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Making Space for New Grain

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From the beginning,
recreate your world in the morning
the earth, the plants and all the lights
and then from dust, in the likeness of humans
wake up tomorrow morning
and start from the beginning.

—Naomi Shemer, “*Haggigah Nigmeret*” (“The Party Is Over”)

Naomi Shemer, one of the most famous songwriters and performers in Israel, is known for her thoughtful songs that touch upon universal themes. In this song, she speaks about the need for rejuvenation. Every morning is an opportunity for a new experience. As successful as our days might be, there is always a need to go back to the beginning and start again.

The opening passage of Behukotai speaks of the blessings that will come to the people of Israel if they follow God’s laws. It also notes the need to make space for the new, even though the old is still good: Leviticus 26:10 states, “You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new” (W. G. Plaut translation). The verse might be an allusion to the preceding chapter, in which God promises to provide Israel sufficient grain; however it also reminds us of the truth that, at a certain time, the old needs to make room for the new.

Shemer’s song encourages us not to hold on to the past, even though we cherish it. In the morning, we need to get up and begin from *Bereishit*—from the beginning.

Parashat Behukotai 5776

פרשת בחקותי תשע"ו



Behukotai’s Challenge to Us

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Blessing comes to fruition through journey. The journey may be as simple as lighting Shabbat candles or it may be as complicated as leaving the comfort of one’s home to discover new worlds. Either way, that which is familiar is left behind, and a new reality challenges one to grow and thus to earn God’s blessing. Such is the challenge of this week’s parashah.

Parashat Behukotai, which forms the epilogue of Va-yikra (Leviticus), opens with a promise of God’s blessing and the imagery of a journey: “If you walk in My laws” [*im behukotai telekhu*],” says God to the Jewish people, “and faithfully observe my commandments, I will grant your rains in their seasons, so that the earth shall yield its produce” (Lev. 26:3–4). The theme and language of this verse evoke God’s call to an individual, Abraham, in Genesis 12. There, God also makes a promise of blessing, and Abraham, responding to God’s command, *lekh lekha*, leaves his homeland. When one remains in the same physical place, the promise of blessing remains just a promise. Physical movement is intimately connected to spiritual movement. Indeed, Abraham must journey from his land, his birthplace, and his father’s house to realize the promise of God’s blessing.

In explaining the opening verse of our parashah, Rashi queries:

Could it be that this verse refers solely to upholding God’s commandments? This, one can understand from the second clause, “and faithfully observe My commandments.” But what is the meaning of the first clause, “if you walk in My laws”? This means that one should labor, even painfully, in Torah.

For Rashi, then, the journey alluded to by our verse resembles the physical journey of Abraham. This journey of the mind and soul entails the same investment of self and departure from routine. One sacrifices time and other activities to become worthy of the blessing of learning. Mere obedience to the commandments is inadequate; one must invest oneself in discovering their deeper essence. The process of learning then becomes an indispensable part of observance. Precisely through learning Torah, one leaves the familiar and becomes challenged in ways previously not conceived of. It is no wonder that Judaism refers to its system of law as *halakhah*—“the way” or “path.” Through physical and spiritual journeys, we become worthy not only of God’s blessing but also God’s closeness.

The Hebrew word *lalekhet*, “to walk” or “to embark on a journey,” becomes a motif of the parashah. As a consequence of *walking* in God’s ways, we are given a powerful promise by God: “I will *walk* about in your midst” (Lev. 26:12). Rashi explains that God’s presence will be felt so strongly that it will be as if God is literally dwelling among us. Responding to the human willingness to embark on a journey, God promises to take action. In the third appearance of *walking* in our parashah, God declares, “I made you *walk* upright” (Lev. 26:13). Here, *lalekhet* refers to God’s freeing the Israelites from Egypt and guiding them on a path to Torah and the Land of Israel. For it is God-given freedom—along with Torah—that allows one to walk upright. But how do we walk together with God?

A fascinating midrash weaves together our walking and God’s walking:

Rav Hama, son of Rav Hanina, said: “After the Lord your God shall you walk” [Deut. 13:5]. But is it possible to walk right behind the Presence?! . . . What the verse means is that you are to follow the ways of the Holy One. He clothed the naked: “The Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin and clothed them” [Gen. 3:21]. So should you clothe the naked. The Holy One visited the sick: “The Lord appeared unto him in the terebinths of Mamre” [Gen. 18:1]. So should you visit the sick. The Holy One buried the dead: “He buried

Moses in the valley” [Deut. 34:6]. So should you bury the dead. The Holy One comforted mourners: “And it came to pass after the death of Abraham that God bestowed blessing upon Isaac his son” [Gen. 25:11]. So should you comfort mourners. (BT Sotah 14a)

This midrash gives us beautiful insight into what it truly means to walk in the way of God. Observing mitzvot such as clothing the naked, visiting the sick, burying the dead, comforting mourners, and learning Torah are some of the opportunities we are given to walk in God’s ways. Yet, just as God gives us the ability to draw near through God’s ways (*halakhah*), our acts of lovingkindness have the ability to draw God into *our* midst.

As we approach Shavuot, one can think of no better heroine for undertaking such a journey than the character of Ruth. Ruth declares to her distraught mother-in-law, Naomi, “For wherever you go, I will go [*ki el asher tilkhi elekh*]” (Ruth 1:16). Ruth’s absolute selflessness and loyalty in the path she chooses are reflected by the passion and awareness underlying these words. Her declaration is personal, in the singular first person, *I will go*.

Such is the challenge of Parashat Behukkotai. Like Ruth, we must be willing to embrace the *halakhah*, the way that God sets before us—following God and walking with God. And may each of us, like Ruth, have the power to declare, “I will go,” and to begin our journey.

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