



5 thoughts

The following five points suggest further lines of enquiry into our Torah portion. As you pursue the Torah adventure, note how ancient texts can lead to prayerful consideration of contemporary situations.

1. “And if you remain hostile toward Me” (26:21). The Hebrew word *keri*, which recurs in verses 21-28, is often translated as ‘hostile;’ however the great medieval Torah scholar Rashi prefers ‘incidental’ or ‘casual’ (from the Hebrew *mikreh*).

2. Rashi’s insight adds spice to our reflections. Most non-believers are not really ‘hostile’ to God but integrate Divinity into their busy lives only incidentally, casually... when it suits them. That is more problematic than being hostile. The hostile individual at least takes God seriously. Following Rashi’s lead, might *keri* (‘casual’) suggest a kind of self-centred manipulateness in relating to God?

3. “You shall dwell securely in your land” (26:5). A divine blessing to be safe in one’s dwelling should extend to a person in any land, should it not? Why does this verse specify “*in your land*”? This question is posed in the Midrash (*Halachah Torat Kohanim*).

4. Against the backdrop of Genesis and Exodus, 26:5 draws attention to a repeated biblical testimony to a deep and sacred connection between the presence of God and the homeland of the Jewish people.

5. “I will grant peace in the land...” Verse 26:6 follows with a blessing of peace. Today the blessing of the land as a basic tenet of Jewish identity exists in a complex political-religious environment. May our Torah insights help us to work and pray for peace.



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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Leviticus 26:3—27:34

Behukotai:
‘my laws’

Why reflect on Torah?

Because of the unique relations that exist between Christianity and Judaism—“linked at the very level of their identity” (John Paul II, March 6, 1982)—relations “founded on the design of the God of the Covenant” (ibid.), the Jews and Judaism should not occupy an occasional and marginal place in catechesis: their presence there is essential and should be organically integrated.

— Commission for Religious Relations with the Jews, *Notes*, 1985.

Since Vatican II a new spirit of reconciliation has entered the Catholic-Jewish relationship. This spirit is slowly translating into practical changes in preaching and catechesis. We can rejoice in what has been positively accomplished even as we strive for greater understanding of the gift and light that Judaism is to the world and of the many ways it has shaped our own Christian faith tradition.

Light of Torah is one practical tool devoted to promoting this understanding in Christian homes and parishes. Each week we invite our readership to explore a portion of the Torah illuminated by Jewish insights into the sacred text.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Leviticus 26:3—27:34

This week we conclude the Book of Leviticus. Over the past weeks we have listened to many detailed instructions foundational to the formation of a people as they learn how to live according to the ways of God. Now, in chapter 26 of this final Torah portion, we come to a motivational ‘pep talk’ in the form of a series of blessings (vv.3-13) and curses (vv.14-45). Read them and share your observations and insights with a friend.

Tasting Torah

What is one of the first things you noticed in reading the blessings and curses in Leviticus 26? Perhaps, like the sages, you noted that there appear to be many more curses than blessings! Does this surprise you, bother you? Surely the God we know and love and who holds our deepest interests at heart is a God characterized by blessing rather than cursing? Why the apparent imbalance here? The sages asked this question. Ponder it yourselves in *havrutah* before reading on.

Touching Torah

Despite the number of verses dealing with curses, Jewish tradition repeatedly discerns (here and throughout the Torah) a principle that says: *Divine goodness outweighs Divine retribution*. Let’s explore three interpretations in support of this principle:

The first comes from Ibn Ezra [12th c.] and has been elaborated over time: If we look closely at the text we see that the blessings are to take place immediately and in their fullness. However the curses are carried out in gradually increasing stages of severity. Transgressors are not struck down all at once, but first with minor blows, then—should they still fail to repent—by more severe blows. Only if they still refuse to reform does the major curse materialize.

Does this view agree with your close reading of the text? Discuss in *havrutah*.

Depthing Torah

Our next interpretation is somewhat similar. Just before the blessings it says:

“If you follow my laws and faithfully observe my commandments...” (26:3)

By contrast, before the curses we read:

“But if you do not obey me and do not observe all these commandments, if you reject my laws and spurn my rules, so that you do not observe all my commandments and you break my covenant...” (26:14-15).

What do you notice? Only after a person ‘rejects’ and ‘spurns’ the laws do the curses follow. Whereas blessings flow from a simple keeping of the law, curses require a sustained effort of rejection!

Our third interpretation involves a playful reflection on the Hebrew alphabet:

Rabbi Shemuel said: the student will find more blessings than curses. How so? The blessings begin with the first letter of the alphabet (alef) and end with the last letter of the alphabet (tav), signifying that alef-tav [A to Z] blessings will reach you. The curses, on the other hand, begin with the sixth letter and end with the fifth letter, and there is nothing between them. [Midrash Tanhuma, Re’e 4]

Doing Torah

Amidst the painful difficulties of life, ‘curses’ can threaten to eclipse our awareness of God’s blessings. How do you live with a fundamental sense of life as gift and blessing?



Faith & Life

A parishioner mentioned to me that whenever she is having a difficult day and starts to feel despondent or negative about things, she pauses and brings to mind five blessings for which she is grateful to God. A practical and divine-like response to life’s everyday challenges!

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *New Studies in Vayikra*, Vol 2 (NY, 1996), 569-571. Scripture: JPS.