

# Parsha Ponders

Bechukosai | May 25, 2022 | 25 Iyar 5782

## *From curses to blessings<sup>1</sup>*

אם-בחקתי תלכו וגו' ואולך אתכם קוממיות: ואם-לא תשמעו לי וגו' אלה החקים והמשפטים אשר נתן יקוק  
בינו ובין בני ישראל בהר סיני ביד-משה

If you walk in my statutes...I will lead you upright. And if you don't listen to me...[such and such will happen]...These are the statutes and laws that Hashem gave between Himself and the Jewish people, on Mount Sinai, through Moshe<sup>2</sup>

*Parshas Bechukosai* is also known as the *Tochacha*, the Rebuke. A large portion of the *parsha* describes all the curses that will, G-d forbid, befall the Jewish people if they don't remain faithful in their observance of the Torah. However, it begins describing all the wonderful blessings that we should receive if we are in fact properly following Hashem's laws.

Our Sages make<sup>3</sup> an interesting observation regarding the blessings and curses. The blessings begin with the first letter of the Jewish Hebrew, *Alef*, and end with the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *Taf*. This seems to imply that the blessings will be all encompassing. This is in contrast to the curses, which start with a *Vav*, and end with a *Heh*<sup>4</sup>. These two letters are adjacent, seemingly implying that the curses will be limited in their scope<sup>5</sup>. Our Sages note further<sup>6</sup> that not only are the curses ranging from two adjacent letters, they're also in reverse. In the Hebrew alphabet, *Heh* comes before *Vav*. We are taught that this is to signify that if we are worthy, Hashem's curses will be flipped into blessings.

We could ask a few questions on these teachings. If the point is to simply show the lack of breadth of the curses, why did the Torah specifically choose the letters *Vav* and *Heh*? Couldn't it have shown this idea with any other two adjacent letters? Furthermore, it seems rather odd that embedded in the curses is an allusion to blessings. How did the Sages come to discern this allusion?

A solution to these inquiries can be found in an interesting historical account<sup>7</sup>. During the siege on Jerusalem right before the destruction of the Second Temple, the Jews in the walled city felt secure. They lived in a fortified city, with enough food to last for years<sup>8</sup>. However, there were Zealots who wanted to take on the Romans in battle. To force the people's hands, they burned the storehouses of food. Upon hearing this, Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai, the leader of the Jewish people, exclaimed, "וי!", the equivalent of today's "Oy!". The Zealots heard this, and seized him for treason. Rabban Yochanan

<sup>1</sup> Based on Mahadura Basra to Bava Basra 88b s.v. אמר רבי לוי, by Rav Moshe Yitzchak ben Rav Bunim, son-in-law of the Maharsha

<sup>2</sup> Leviticus 26:3,13,14,46. See note 4

<sup>3</sup> Vayikra Rabbah 35:1; Midrash Tanchuma Re'eh § 4

<sup>4</sup> I would have thought that the curses end with v. 41, עמם בקרי והבאתי אתם בארץ איבהם, since the preceding verses describe Hashem remembering His covenant with the forefathers, the land receiving the rest it required, and Hashem not forsaking us in the lands of our enemies. The *Midrash* instead understands that the curses "end" with the concluding verse, before the *parsha* of *Arachin* (as understood by Mattanos Kehunah ad. loc.; indeed, it's hard to find an alternative interpretation. As well, this is explicit in Midrash Tanchuma loc. cit.).

However, as pointed out by the Rashash ad. loc., Bava Basra loc. cit. says the curses end v. 43. See also the Shela HaKadosh in his Shenei Luchos HaBris Torah Sh'B'Kesav parshas Bechukosai § 4, who says that v. 42 is also a curse

<sup>5</sup> See Maharzu ad. loc. This also seems to be what Midrash Tanchuma loc. cit. is conveying

<sup>6</sup> Vayikra Rabbah loc. cit.

<sup>7</sup> Eichah Rabbah 1:31

<sup>8</sup> Gittin 56a says there was enough food to last for the entire city for twenty-one years! See there for more on this episode

told them that he didn't say, "וי", but rather, "וה", an expression of joy<sup>9</sup>. Upon hearing this, he was released. He had managed to trick them and lived to see another day.

We see then that the letters *Vav* and *Heh*, when adjacent, are an expression of joy. It makes perfect sense then why the Torah starts and ends the curses with these letters. Hidden within the curses is the opportunity for joy and blessing. If we end up deserving the curses, G-d forbid, hope is not lost. If we manage to correct our ways, and improve, then these curses will be flipped to blessings. There will be great joy, and everyone will exclaim: "וה!"

Good Shabbos

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<sup>9</sup> Our Sages say that והיה (which starts with וה) is an expression of joy (Bamidbar Rabbah 13:5; Esther Rabbah Pesikta § 11; Rus Rabbah Pesikta § 7)