

Behukotai Torah Thoughts

5778:

This week we read the final parsha of the book of Vayikra/Leviticus, parshat Behukotai. It is one of the sections of the Torah that lays out a series of blessings and curses for either obeying or ignoring God's mitzvot. I have always had a problem with how we understand the word 'mitzvot.' If we translate it as 'commands' we are left with little choice but to do them or be punished. The image of a commanding God does not suggest a great deal of latitude about how to respond to mitzvot. But the whole point of the blessing/curse passages in Torah is that we always have a choice, and that our well-being is wholly dependent upon our choosing well. That is a different starting point than feeling we have no choice at all, and suggests that a better translation for the word 'mitzvot' might be 'demands.'

A demanding God is one who presents us a clear and uncompromising system of morality and behaviors, but one who also explicitly acknowledges that, despite being given every opportunity to do what we should, we will sometimes choose wrongly. The freedom to make bad choices, even when we know they will be to our detriment, is basic to how the text understands God and our relationship to God.

Experience teaches us that following the mitzvot does not always lead to success, just as ignoring them does not consistently lead to punishment. That reality could lead to a loss of faith if we too tightly associate God's expectations with commands that cannot be refused. But seeing those expectations instead as demands puts the burden of choosing well, and doing so consistently, firmly upon us. Following every command and still feeling the world to be unjust, or flouting commands and feeling just fine would make a mockery of mitzvot. But knowing what is demanded of us means that we take responsibility for every decision. Knowing what God demands, the onus is upon us to decide how to respond, and who to be. By shifting our understanding of mitzvot from command to demand, we affirm our own responsibility for creating a righteous world with our every decision.