

TIMELESS TORAH

BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI - BLESSING IN MOTION: CREATING AN UPWARD CYCLE

One Step Down

The double *parshiyot* of Behar and Bechukotai form a challenging epilogue to Sefer Vayikra. One of the keys towards understanding these *parshiyot* lies in the prominent theme of cycles in sets of seven, an example of which is highlighted by Rashi towards the end of Parshat Behar (26:1). The verse on which Rashi comments exhorts a person who has sold himself into servitude to a non-Jewish master to stay strong to his faith and not turn to foreign gods. According to Rashi, this is the final devastating stage of a downward trajectory; the person began by ignoring one commandment and progressed to other harmful patterns of behaviour. Tracing the mitzvot of the parshah, Rashi describes how they are actually a sequential seven-part pattern: A person who cannot withstand the temptations of money illegally sells *shemittah* produce (25:4-7). He is punished with poverty and is forced to sell his possessions (25:14), his land (25:25-28) and eventually his house (25:29-34). Becoming increasingly destitute, he borrows money on interest (25:36-7) and, in desperation, sells himself into servitude (25:39-43), possibly even to a non-Jew (25:47-54).

Clearly, the Torah is emphasising the consequences of negative patterns of behaviour, which enables a person to continue sliding downwards. Equally, however, recognition of these patterns can help understand how to turn them on their head and begin moving upwards. The Sefer HaChinuch (Mitzvah 84) explains the rationale behind the mitzvah of leaving the land fallow on *shemittah*, which is the first mitzvah in Rashi's spiral. He writes that observing the laws of the seventh year creates a powerful image in our mind that

Hashem created the world in six days and rested on the seventh. Much as the mitzvah of Shabbat sanctifies our time by helping us internalise this point, the mitzvah of *shemittah* sanctifies our space, the Land of Israel, in a similar way. Thus, *shemittah* impresses the message of relinquishing ideas of human ownership, instead encouraging attribution of material possessions to the Creator. Looking again at Rashi's spiral, it appears that the transgression of the laws of *shemittah* indeed led to the person's complete loss of everything they owned. Taking the lessons of *shemittah* in the correct way, therefore, involving strengthening one's faith and understanding that what we have is God-given, is the first step upwards.

Keystone Habits

The second step in moving out of a negative cycle is choosing which pathway to follow in life. An allusion to this is found in the opening words of Parshat Bechukotai: '*Im bechukotai telechu* – If you follow my statutes'. This verse, Rashi explains, does not refer to heeding mitzvot, as that is already explicitly mentioned elsewhere in the same verse. Rather, this part of the verse refers to 'toiling in Torah study'. If the Jewish people toil in the study of Torah, the verse promises, they will merit the blessings of bounty described in the coming verses. The Nachalat Yaakov (Rabbi Yaakov Slonik, Poland, d. 1643) notes that the word '*telech* – to go' is found in reference to Torah study also in a verse in Yirmiyahu (9:11-12): '*Al mah avdah ha'aretz ... al azvam et torati ... v'lo sham'u b'koli v'lo halchu bah* – Why does the land perish ... because they have forsaken my Torah ... and have not obeyed My voice nor walked



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therein'. Commenting on the three distinct expressions in this verse — 'forsaking the Torah', 'obeying Hashem's voice' and 'walking in the ways of the Torah' — the Malbim (d.1879) explains that there are three levels at which one can be attached to the Torah. The highest level is one who appreciates the spiritual delights of the Torah, and the verse admonishes those who have forsaken that. Moving on, the verse mentions those who have failed to heed Hashem's voice out of obedience, and then, at the lowest level, those who have not even made Torah learning a habit (*halchu* – walked) to which they have become accustomed.

Following the Malbim's commentary, we once again identify here a tool towards building positive progression in life. The first stage in one's journey towards discovering the delights of the Torah is to make it into a habit. In modern behavioural research, popularised by author and journalist Charles Duhigg (b.1974), an effective way of making significant positive life changes is through creating a 'keystone habit'. This is a behavioural linchpin of a small foundational routine which triggers a domino effect of positive behaviour without requiring massive willpower. For example, being particular to do five minutes of exercise every day is likely to lead to better eating habits, increased productivity and enhanced emotional control. In the same way, teaches the Malbim, fixing a session for learning Torah and making this a habit can set a person on an upwards trajectory, eventually leading to the highest levels of Torah observance.

Small Changes, Big Results

A recurring word in the *Tochachah* (Admonition) is '*keri*', for which Rashi offers two translations. Firstly, this word is related to the word '*mikreh* – happenstance', and secondly, it could have a meaning of restraint. These are two negative pathways that a person is able to take in their spiritual life. They can have a haphazard approach towards keeping the mitzvot, keeping them as and when they happen to be convenient. Alternatively, they can restrain themselves in general from fully committed mitzvah observance, perhaps keeping everything, but in a half-hearted way. Either way, the Torah warns that this is not the way to attain spiritual growth. Significantly, the Torah states that if the Jewish people act in this way towards the mitzvot, Hashem will in turn behave towards them with an attitude of *keri*, restraining His bounty towards them.

The Netziv (d.1893) offers a surprising alternative explanation to this. The underlying concept of happenstance, he writes, involves an inconsistent mindset - one day thinking in one way, changing positions the next. According to the Netziv, if the Jewish people repent and confess their sins, leading to a change in their previous mindset, Hashem will also display a 'flexible perspective', so to speak, and eventually bring them close to Him. Once again, as with the Malbim's insight, we find that small shifts in perspective and behaviour patterns can open a pathway towards much greater and more wonderful things in life.

NEXT WEEK: BEMIDBAR : From Counting to Contribution