



A Reality Without Fear

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The Book of Leviticus, and Parashat BeHukkotai that brings it to a close, makes a clear and recurring claim: reality is not an act of fate, but the outcome of human choice and behavior.

BeHukkotai lays out the fundamental choice facing every individual:

ויקרא כו:ג,טו

אם בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאֶת מִצְוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ...¹⁵ וְאִם בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּמָּאֲסוּ וְאִם אֶת מִשְׁפָּטִי תִגְעַל וְנִפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכָם אֶת בְּרִיתִי:

Leviticus 26:3,15

³If you walk in My laws and faithfully observe My commandments... ¹⁵but if you reject My laws and your soul loathes My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant.

The consequences of each path are clearly laid out. Following God's laws results in abundance, satiety, and security: rain in its season, peace in the land, and a Divine presence that dwells among the people (26:4-12). In contrast, breaking the covenant brings fear, illness, defeat, and ruin: panic, fever, being struck down before enemies, and cities laid waste (26:16-31).



The verses clarify that the covenant is built upon these choices:

וְאִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ לִי וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוֹת הָאֵלֶּה: ¹⁵וְאִם בְּחִקְתִּי תִמָּאֶסוּ וְאִם אֶת מִשְׁפָּטִי תִגְעֹל
נִפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתֵי לְהִפְרֹכֶם אֶת בְּרִיתִי: ¹⁶אֲףִי אֲנִי אַעֲשֶׂה זֹאת לָכֶם

¹⁴But if you do not obey Me and do not observe all these commandments, ¹⁵if you reject My laws and spurn My rules, so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant, ¹⁶**I in turn will do this to you.**”

We are presented with a sequence of decision points: the choice to listen, to act, and to fulfill the commandments—or the choice to loathe the laws, reject the rules, and ultimately break the covenant.

Even when the verses describe God’s response to human behavior, a *midrash* in the Sifra (the earliest midrashic collection on Leviticus) expands the scope of human choice, ensuring that our agency is never obscured:

ספרא בחוקותי פרשה ב פרק ד אות א

"לכם" – מידכם היתה זאת; אין הרעה יוצאת מלפני לעולם. וכן הוא אומר (איכה ג, לח) "מפי עליון לא תצא הרעות" אלא הטוב.

Sifra BeHukkotai parashah 2 perek 4 ot 1

“To you”—this was from your own hands; evil never comes forth from Me. And so it says, “From the mouth of the Most High, evil does not go forth” (Lamentations 3:38)—but only “good.”

The *midrash* insists that reality is the product of human choice and action: “this was from your own hands.”

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The biblical verses describe various consequences of human choice: hunger or satiety, lack or abundance, war or peace. Among these pairings, we also find fear. A reality free of fear is the fruit of choosing the covenant; conversely, a reality saturated with fear follows the rejection of God's way. Fear is distinct from the other consequences. While the others describe external or physical circumstances, fear is a state of consciousness or an emotion. What is fear and its place within the choice of the covenant?

The Sifra also emphasizes the centrality of fear—or its disappearance—when one chooses to follow God's laws. On the verse, “I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down and none shall make you afraid; I will rid the land of vicious beasts” (Leviticus 26:6), the *midrash* clarifies: “וְשָׁכַבְתֶּם וְאֵין מַחְרִיד – לא יראים מכל בריה” – “And you shall lie down and none shall make you afraid”—[meaning] you will not fear any creature” (*parashah 1 perek 2 ot 1*). The *midrash* suggests that keeping the covenant creates a reality where no threat is posed by any person, or perhaps any living thing.

Another *midrash* in the Sifra addresses the phrase that summarizes the life of the covenant: “I will make you walk erect (*komemiyut*)” (Leviticus 26:13). Once again, the *midrash* chooses to infuse the verse with the removal of fear: “וְאֵין מַחְרִיד – בקומה זקופה שלא תהיו יראים” – “I will make you walk erect”—with an upright stature, so that you shall not fear any creature” (*parashah 1 perek 3 ot 7*). According to this *midrash*, the reality of the covenant is, at its core, a reality free from fear.

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Fear plays a pivotal role in the system of consequences that stem from human choice. The



Torah promises that one of the primary rewards for walking in God's laws is the reduction of fear. Yet, fear plays a further role: by either enabling or limiting our ability to opt into the covenant, it serves as a precondition for the very capacity to choose. Fear is one of the primary forces that narrows our sense of agency and our range of possibilities. It makes us feel helpless and constrained, stripping away our sense of autonomy. A person gripped by fear experiences reality as something imposed upon them—as inevitable and unavoidable—rather than as a space where they possess the agency to influence and shape their world. In order to make good choices one needs a sense of hope, a belief and trust in the future, as open, with various possibilities for the expansion of life. If one believes that the future will be terrible regardless of one's choices, then choice becomes meaningless and one becomes frozen.

The *midrash* above understands *komemiyut* as walking upright and free of fear. The second blessing before the Shema uses this language, “ותוליכנו קוממיות לארצינו” - Make us walk erect to our land,” linking it to our return to the Land of Israel, the establishment of sovereignty, and the dignity of standing tall in our ancestral home and among the nations. For many of us in Israel—and in a pressing way lately—reality has shifted. A sense of walking upright and proud has been shaken and undermined by fear and hopelessness. Our *parashah* challenges us to meet this moment with the resolve to walk in God's ways even when we are most afraid.

May we choose covenant, walk in wisdom in the ways of God, *komemiyut*, upright, proud, without fear.

