

**Parshat Behar-Bechukotai  
Not Despising You**

Simon Wolf

Parshat Bechukotai describes the covenant formed between God and Bnei Yisrael at Har Sinai.<sup>1</sup> It at first describes the positive outcome of Bnei Yisrael complying with their obligations under the pact. "If you walk in My statutes, and keep My commandments, and do them (אִם-וַתֵּלְכוּ בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּלְכוּ)..."<sup>2</sup> then all these wonderful blessings will devolve upon you. It then details the result, if heaven forbid, Bnei Yisrael do not live up to their commitment. "If you will not listen to Me, and will not do all these commandments (וְאִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי וְאִם-וְלֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ תַמְאִסוּ)...and abrogate the covenant..."<sup>3</sup> then God will rain havoc, destruction and difficulties on Bnei Yisrael. The longer Bnei Yisrael remain recalcitrant, the harsher, more intense and prolonged the duration of the punishments will be. As would be expected, the blessings are replete with positivity, success and ascendancy and, vice versa, the curses are filled with terrible difficulties, destruction and meekness.

While all the blessings and curses seem to appropriately fit this mold, there is one oddity that stands out. Amongst the positive items that God will shower on Bnei Yisrael for keeping their side of the bargain, the Torah lists that the rain will fall in a timely fashion and the land will be productive and bountiful.<sup>4</sup> Peace and tranquility will pervade the land and you will be militarily successful and your enemies will be on the run. God will ensure that your population expands exponentially and that you are prolific. God commits to "establish My abode in your midst (וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם) and I will not spurn you (וְלֹא-תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם)." What a strange blessing that I will not spurn, loathe or abhor (תִּגְעַל) you! The Ramban is completely perplexed. "I do not know what would be the meaning of this, that the Holy One, blessed be He, should say that if we keep all the commandments

and do His will, He will not reject us and His soul will not abhor us!"<sup>5</sup> As Rashi notes, the word Tig'al (תִּגְעַל) has a very negative connotation; it means to cast or spew out or expunge.<sup>6</sup> To support his contention, Rashi marshals a verse from David's eulogy for Sha'ul, who was killed in the battle with the Plishtim. "You mountains of Gilbo'a, let there be no dew nor rain upon you, or fields of choice fruits. For there the shield of the mighty was defiled (נִגְעַל), the shield of Sha'ul, not anointed with oil."<sup>7</sup> The practice in their day was to anoint the leather shield with oil in order that the enemy's swords and arrows would slip off of it. In Shaul's battlefield loss, David presents the imagery that it was as if the shield of Sha'ul rejected (נִגְעַל) its oiling and therefore caused the death of Sha'ul since it could no longer turn away the enemy's weapons. In light of this, Rashi interprets the verse to mean, "My spirit will not loathe you (אִין רוּחִי קִצָּה בְּכֶם)" which seems anomalous in context of the other blessings. The Ramban is so confounded that he offers no alternative straight forward explanation of the verse.

The Ibn Ezra, in an attempt to address this issue, explains the blessing in the following manner.<sup>8</sup> This (וְלֹא-תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם) is a Divine attribute that, unlike human beings, God does not grow tired of residing in a single location and therefore His abode (וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם) will steadily remain amongst Bnei Yisrael. Along those lines, the Sifra offers an eternal message of hope that once God redeems Bnei Yisrael, He will no longer reject them (מִשְׁאֲנִי גּוֹאֵל אֶתְכֶם שׁוֹב אִינִי מוֹאֵס בְּכֶם).<sup>9</sup> While it is a very uplifting message and hopefully true, nevertheless, the blessings enumerated here are directed towards those that are entering the land for the first time and not necessarily about a return after being exiled. In addition, while the Ibn Ezra's explanation is more palatable, it still seems strange that God would have to reassure Bnei Yisrael that He will not bolt when they are conforming to their side of the covenant.

<sup>1</sup> אֱלֹהֵי הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים וְהַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן יְקֻקֵּ בְיָמֵינוּ וְבִין בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּהָר סִינַי בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה: (ויקרא כו,ג)  
<sup>2</sup> אִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ וְאִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי תֵּלְכוּ: (ויקרא כו,ג)  
<sup>3</sup> וְאִם-וְלֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ תַמְאִסוּ וְאִם-וְלֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ תַמְאִסוּ וְאִם-וְלֹא-תַעֲשׂוּ תַמְאִסוּ: (ויקרא כו,ד)  
<sup>4</sup> וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם: (ויקרא כו,ג)  
<sup>5</sup> וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם: (ויקרא כו,ג)  
<sup>6</sup> וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם: (ויקרא כו,ג)  
<sup>7</sup> וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם: (ויקרא כו,ג)  
<sup>8</sup> וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם: (ויקרא כו,ג)  
<sup>9</sup> וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְנִתְּתִי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם: (ויקרא כו,ג)

בשמרנו כל המצות ועשותנו רצונו לא ימאס אותנו בגעול נפשנו, וכן בעברנו על בריתנו ועשותנו נאצות גדולות אמר (להלן פסוק מד) לא מאסתיים ולא געלתיים, ואמר הנביא בשעת הקללה (ירמיה יד ט) המאוס מאסת את יהודה אם בציון געלה נפשך: אבל הענין שוד מסתרי התורה, אמר שיתן משכנו בתוכנו והנפש אשר ממנה יבא המשכן לא תגעל אותו ככלי שמגעלין אותו ברותחין, אבל בכל עת יהיו בגדינו לבנים וחדשים, כי הגעילה פליטה כדברי רש"י, מלשון שורו עבר ולא יגעיל תפלט פרתו ולא תשכל (איוב כא י). ואמר "נפשי", כדרך נשבע ה' אלהים בנפשו (עמוס ו ח). והנביא אמר בתנאי אם בציון עצמה געלה נפשך, שהיא עיר ואם בישראל והשלת אותה מלפניך להיות כל בניה לבושים בגדים צואים נגאלים: (רמב"ן ויקרא כו,א)  
<sup>6</sup> ולא תגעל נפשי - אין רוחי קצה בכם. כל געילה לשון פליטת דבר הבלוע בדבר אחר, כמו (שמואל ב' א כא) כי שם נגעל מגן גבורים, לא קבל המשיחה שמושחין מגן של עור בחלב מבושל, כדי להחליק מעליו מכת חץ או חנית, שלא יקוב העור: (רש"י ויקרא כו,א)  
<sup>7</sup> הרי בגלבע אל-טל ואל-מטר עליכם ושד' תרומת קי' שם נגעל מגן גבורים מגן שאלו גלי משיח בשמן: (שמואל ב' א כא)  
<sup>8</sup> ונתתי משכני - ולא תפחדו לעולם שתבואו לידי חסרון, כי כבודי דר עמכם. ואינו כן אדם, שתגעל נפשו לשבת במקום אחד. (אבן עזרא ויקרא כו,א)  
<sup>9</sup> ולא תגעל נפשי אתכם - משאני גואל אתכם שוב איני מואס בכם. (ספרא ויקרא כו,א)

It is interesting to note that the verb “Ga'al (געל)” only appears in the Torah five times and all five of those instances are found in this week's Parsha. In the other four cases, the word is utilized in a negative context. In describing, Bnei Yisrael's noncompliance with the covenant, the Torah states, “If you reject My statutes (וְאִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי) and spurn My ordinances (וְאִם אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי) (תִּמְאָסוּ), so that you do not observe all My commandments and you break My covenant...”<sup>10</sup>

If Bnei Yisrael continue in their improper ways and do not heed God's punishments then, “I will destroy your high places and cut down your incense altars, and I will heap your carcasses upon your lifeless fetishes; and My soul will **abhor** you (וְגַעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם).”<sup>11</sup> As a summary of why Bnei Yisrael will eventually be exiled from Eretz Yisrael if they fail to mend their deviant ways, “For the land shall be forsaken of them, making up for its Shabbat years by being desolate of them, while they atone for their iniquity; for the abundant reason that they rejected My ordinances and **spurned** My statutes (וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתַי גַּעַל נַפְשָׁם).”<sup>12</sup> In all three of these instances, the word “Ga'al (געל)” is utilized in a negative context of either rejection of God's commandments or God's revulsion with Bnei Yisrael because of their misdeeds. The last time it appears is at the end of the rebuke where it is used as consolation and to give hope for the difficulties endured. “Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them or **spurn** them (לֹא-מֵאֲסִיתִים וְלֹא-גַעַלְתִּים) so as to destroy them utterly or to annul My covenant with them: for I am God their Lord.”<sup>13</sup> It is found in a positive, reassuring context, but it, nevertheless, is negating an adverse situation which persists and is inherently negative and therefore its usage is understandable. These examples only serve to exacerbate the problematic nature of the usage of the verb “Ga'al (געל)” and its formulation (“I will not loathe, spurn or abhor you”) that is presented as a blessing in the beginning of the Parsha.

Without too much effort, one can discern that the blessing (וְלֹא-תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם) is a contrasting pair with one of the negative manifestations in the Parsha. When God is angry and fed-up with Bnei Yisrael's unrelenting misconduct, He declares

<sup>10</sup> וְאִם-בְּחֻקֹּתַי תִּמְאָסוּ וְאִם אֶת-מִשְׁפָּטַי תִּגְעַל נַפְשְׁכֶם לְבַלְתִּי עֲשׂוּת אֶת-קְל-מִצְוֹתַי לְהַפְרֹכֶם אֶת-בְּרִיתִי: (ויקרא כו, טו)  
<sup>11</sup> וְהִשְׁמַדְתִּי אֶת-בְּמִתְיָלָם וְהִכְרַתִּי אֶת-חֲמֻנֵיכֶם וְנִתְתִּי אֶת-פְּגָרֵיכֶם עַל-פְּגָרֵי גְלוּלֵיכֶם וְגַעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם: (ויקרא כו, לו)  
<sup>12</sup> וְהִאֲרַץ תִּעֲזֹב מֵהֶם וְתִרְצַח אֶת-שִׁבְתֵּיהֶם בְּהַשְׁמֵרָה מֵהֶם וְהֵם יִרְצוּ אֶת-עֲוֹנֵם יְעוּ וְיִבְעוּ בְּמִשְׁפָּטַי מֵאִסּוּ וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתַי גַּעַל נַפְשָׁם: (ויקרא כו, מג)  
<sup>13</sup> וְאִף-גַּם יִזְאוּת בְּהַיּוֹתֵם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲבוֹתֵיכֶם לֹא-מֵאֲסִיתִים וְלֹא גַעַלְתִּים לְכַלְתֵּם לְהַפְרֹתִי אֶתְכֶם כִּי אֲנִי יְקַוֶּה אֲלֵיכֶם: (ויקרא כו, מד)  
<sup>14</sup> וְיִצְרָה יְקַוֶּה אֲלֵיכֶם אֶת-הָאָדָם עֶפְרָיִם מִן-הָאָדָמָה וְיִפַּח בְּאִפּוֹ נְשִׁמַּת חַיִּים וְיִהְיֶה הָאָדָם לְגַפְשׁ חַיָּה: (בראשית ב, ז)

that He will despise and abhor them (וְגַעַל נַפְשִׁי) (אֶתְכֶם). It is clear that the blessing is disavowing this alternative of God rejecting Bnei Yisrael. Yet, it still leaves one wondering that would it not have made eminent more sense to formulate the blessing in the positive. For instance, “I will revel in you”, “I will draw you close to me”, or “I will desire you” rather than simply countermending the possibility of rejection that occurs when Bnei Yisrael misbehave.

In the beginning of Sefer Breishit, it describes the creation of Man. “God, the Lord, formed the man from the dust of the ground and blew in his nostrils a breath of life (וְנִשְׁמַת חַיִּים) and the man became a living being (לְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה).”<sup>14</sup> The Zohar is often quoted as saying, “the One who blew, blew of himself (מֵאֵן דִּנְפַח מֵדִילֵיהּ נִפַח),”<sup>15</sup> meaning that there is a piece of God in every individual (הַנְשֵׁמָה שֶׁהִיא חֵלֶק אֱלוֹהִים מֵעַל). Consequently, the infusion of the lifeless being with spirituality (נֶפֶשׁ) transformed them into a living being (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה). In Kabbalistic thought, the Nefesh (נֶפֶשׁ) describes the basest form of the life force of the individual. It would seem that this is corroborated by the Torah since later in that same chapter the animals are described as “living beings (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה).” “God, the Lord, formed from the ground every beast of the field and every bird of the heavens and brought them to the man to see what he would call it; and whatever the man called the living creature (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה), that was its name.”<sup>16</sup> The term “living being (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה)” is shared descriptor for the life force of both humans and animals. Obviously, humans are distinct from animals and the Targum Onkelos translates the terms differently in their respective contexts. He describes the animal as a “living being (וְנֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה),”<sup>17</sup> whereas, with regards to humans, he terms them as a “speaking being (רוּחַ מְמַלְלָה).”<sup>18</sup> While this could be a significant difference, nevertheless, in its most basic form, it still seems to describe the human as a more advanced animal.

The true distinguishing feature of humans is their (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה), the spiritual and divine aspect of their existence. When a human passes away or an animal dies, their life force ceases to exist and therefore all that remains is the lifeless corpse or carcass. Though, with humans, they continue to

<sup>15</sup> לֹא נִמְצְאוּ צִיטוּט זֶה בְּזֶה לְמִרוֹת שֶׁגַם בְּעַל הַתַּיִּינָה וְהַנֶּפֶשׁ הַחַיִּים מִצִּטוּטִים אוֹתוֹ. זֶה כֵּן נִמְצָא בְּסֵפֶר הַקְּנֵה וְגַם דְּבָרִים דּוּמִים נִמְצְאִים בְּפִירוּשׁ הַרַמְבַּ"ן עַל הַתּוֹרָה (צָרִיךְ לְבַדּוֹק יוֹתֵר לְעוֹמֵק)  
<sup>16</sup> וְיִצְרָה יְקַוֶּה אֲלֵיכֶם מִן-הָאָדָמָה כֹּל-חַיָּה הַשְּׂדֵה וְאֵת כָּל-עוֹף הַשָּׁמַיִם וְיִבֵּא אֶל-הָאָדָם לְרִאוֹת מֵהֶם יִקְרָאוּ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר יִקְרָאוּ הָאָדָם נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמוֹ: (בראשית ב, טז)  
<sup>17</sup> וְכָרָא יְיָ אֱלֹהִים מִן אֲרַעָא כָּל חַיָּה בְּרָא וְיֵת כָּל עוֹפָא דְשָׁמַיָא וְאִתִּי לֹת אָדָם לְמַחְזֵי מֵא בְּרִיתִי לְהוֹן וְכָל דְּהוּהוּ קָרִי לִיהּ אָדָם נֶפֶשׁא חַיָּה הוּא שְׁמֵיהּ. (תַּרְגוּם אוֹנְקֵלוֹס בְּרַאשִׁית ב, טז)  
<sup>18</sup> וְכָרָא יְיָ אֱלֹהִים יֵת אָדָם עֶפְרָא מִן אֲרַעָא וְנֶפֶשׁ בְּאִפּוּהִי נִשְׁמַתָּא דְחַיָּי וְהוּת בְּאָדָם לְרוּחַ מְמַלְלָה. (תַּרְגוּם אוֹנְקֵלוֹס בְּרַאשִׁית ב, ז)

“exist” through their Neshama which being of divine origin is eternal. There is a natural dissonance between the physical and worldly Nefesh and the divine and spiritual Neshama. It is a constant tension. The goal in life is to have the Neshama win over the Nefesh, leveraging the physical to enhance the spiritual, in order that one can maximize their capacity to be eternal. That is what is meant when Avigail wished David HaMelech “may the soul of my lord be bound in the bundle of life, with God your Lord (וְהִיתָה נַפְשׁוֹ (אֲדוֹנָי צְרוּרָהוּ בְצִרוּר הַחַיִּים אֶת יְקִיָּק אֱלֹהֶיךָ.”<sup>19</sup> It is the source for the common refrain used when speaking about those who have passed away, “that his soul should be enwrapped in the bundle of life (תהא נשמתו בצרור החיים).” Of course, heaven forbid, the opposite can be true where the Nefesh governs the Neshama and it harnesses the spiritual aspect to further the physical desires of the Nefesh. In that instance, the human appears more similar to an animal whereby they create a more ephemeral and mortal life that is terminated upon passing. The de-emphasis of the Neshama leaves it with a much weaker bond and familiarity with the divine and therefore minimizes its immortal aspect. Given this understanding of the life force (נפש) that is granted from God, being the spirit with the most material and corporeal aspect of humans which is also somewhat shared with animals, it would make sense and one would assume that the term would only be used in reference to humans and animals. That is true of the usage of the term throughout the Torah with two exceptions.

Those two instances are found in the contrasting pair that was noted above. The blessing “and My soul will not spurn you (וְלֹא-תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם)” and its negative counterpart “My soul will despise and abhor them (וְגַעְלָה נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם).” It seems incongruous for the Torah to describe the eternal God as being connected or compared to the transient soul. The blessing proceeding the commitment that God will not despise you is that He will make His abode among you. In order for God to “dwell” amongst humans, it by definition creates dissonance. As noted previously, that tension exists on a personal level within each individual. Moreover, it also is manifest at a national and worldly level. God’s manifestation in this world is similar to the Nefesh of the individual.

It is the lowest form of Godliness that can exist within the confines of a material world and many times that spirituality will come into conflict with earthly existence. That is what is meant when God declares “My soul will despise and abhor them (וְגַעְלָה נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם);” it is a natural result of Bnei Yisrael’s impropriety. God’s spirituality can no longer coexist with a defiant and sinning Bnei Yisrael and it is naturally repulsed and driven away from its ability to remain connected to and in proximity with them. On the other hand, if Bnei Yisrael uphold their side of the covenant and the spiritual foundations are strong, then the limitless God is willing to overcome the natural dissonance (וְלֹא-תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם) to make His abode amongst Bnei Yisrael (וְנִתְתִּי מִשְׁכְּנִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם). It is similar to two magnets with opposite polarity which naturally separate. With coaxing and external force they can be brought together (וְלֹא-תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם), but without that exogenous intervention they revert to the natural state of repelling each other (וְגַעְלָה נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם). The inevitable result of Bnei Yisrael emphasizing the material and ignoring God’s will and commandments is the removal of God’s presence from dwelling amongst them. If the problem persists then that dissonance creates the need for an unrepentant Bnei Yisrael to be expelled from Eretz Yisrael because of their incompatibility with a holy land.

God has given us the opportunity to return to the holy land and it is now our job to build a nation and a land that is hospitable to the presence of God (וְלֹא-תִגְעַל נַפְשִׁי אֶתְכֶם) so that God’s “soul” can once again dwell among us and return us to the blessings found at the beginning of this week’s Parsha. That requires emphasizing our Neshama over our Nefesh – spirituality and Godliness over material pleasure and selfish transience – which will grants us immortality and eternal life (בצורר) through being connected to God and will act as a guaranty that once God has redeemed us He will no longer reject us.

Shabbat Shalom

לעילוי נשמת הנרצחים ז"ל בארץ ישראל, לרפואה שלימה לפצועים, לגאולה קרובה לנעדרים ולשבויים, והצלחה ושמירה ובשורות טובות וישועות ונחמות לכל כלל ישראל ובמיוחד לחיילי צה"ל העומדים על משמר ארצנו וערי אלקינו

<sup>19</sup> נִקְמָה אֲדוֹם לְרִדְפָךָ וְלִבְקֶשׁ אֶת-נַפְשֶׁךָ, וְהִיתָה נַפְשׁוֹ אֲדוֹנָי צְרוּרָהוּ בְצִרוּר הַחַיִּים אֶת יְקִיָּק אֱלֹהֶיךָ וְאֶת נַפְשׁוֹ אֲדוֹנָי יְקִיָּק אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּתוֹךְ גִּף הַקְּלָע. (שמואל א כה, כט)