

SIDRA OF THE WEEK: בחוקותי

1. One of the Thirteen Principles of Faith of the Jewish People is that HaShem rewards those that live their lives righteously as He has commanded in His Torah and punishes those that knowingly transgress His Will. What our Chachommim, of blessed memory, have termed “Olam HaBoh,” the World-to-Come, is part of HaShem’s scheme of reward for those worthy people who have earned great merit for living virtuous lives but who, for one reason or another, did not receive their reward in their lifetime in this world. Thus, belief in Olam HaBoh is one of the fundamental tenets of the Jewish Faith. Yet there is in fact no explicit mention in the Torah itself of the great and wondrous World-to-Come. To be sure, in the Torah itself there are many allusions and hints, which our Chachommim, of blessed memory, point out for us, but HaShem deliberately omitted from His Torah any open reference to Olam HaBoh. One of the reasons for this is that promises of great things in the distant future are easy to make: anyone can promise anything — later. Thus it is that without exception each of the charlatans and frauds of the world’s scarecrow “religions” all threaten various kinds of hell and purgatory (but only after death) for those who do not obey them and promise all kinds of paradise and pleasure (again, after death) to those who are foolish enough to follow them. After all, nobody can ever come back to expose them as liars, so they are safe in their promises! But it is only HaShem our G-d, the Creator of the Universe and its Master and Controller, Who can command obedience and Who in return can promise peace and prosperity, not in some nebulous, distant future, but here and now, in this world. Only HaShem, the Lord and Sovereign of all creation, can command us, His Chosen People, to keep His Mitzvos, and promise reward for obedience and punishment for disobedience and fulfil His promises, not later, but here and now.
2. This Sidra begins with such a promise: If we make the study of Torah our main concern, and keep the Mitzvos of HaShem, there will follow peace and prosperity and health and happiness. When we comply with the wishes of HaShem and live our lives, individually and as a Nation, how He has commanded us, then HaShem sets heaven and earth, which He Himself created and which He controls, into such harmonious concord that our individual lives and our national existence is one long progression of blessing and happiness. The rewards of Olam HaBoh are in addition to all this: Olam HaBoh is where the deserving Tzaddikim enjoy spiritual bliss, the like of which can hardly be imagined, without any hindrances of physical or material needs. But because the Torah is concerned

primarily with our existence in this physical world, therefore HaShem makes no mention explicitly of the Olam HaBoh which comes afterwards.

3. And yet if we diligently learn His Torah and conscientiously keep His Mitzvos, when all the blessings of HaShem follow — here and now — this is not even so much as a reward but more as a direct result of our obedience to Him. Exactly how this chain of cause and effect works, we cannot always understand: in the “rational” world, cause and effect must have some evident connexion and how can wearing Tefillin, or keeping the Shabbos, or giving Tzedokoh, etc., have anything to do with the rains coming on time or with the fear of our enemies to invade our Land? Nevertheless, in the same way as “natural” cause and effect operate in the world in general, so too has HaShem implanted into His world the special “unnatural” fact that His People’s welfare and happiness depends only upon our keeping the Torah (as indeed the welfare and happiness of the whole world depends upon this, too).
4. If, however, the People of HaShem is unfaithful to its special calling, then HaShem warns of the punishment — in this world — that will follow. The root of the disobedience of the Will of HaShem lies in the Jewish People forsaking the learning of His Torah, and from this neglect flow all the terrible consequences and calamities that are listed in the chapter of warning and rebuke that are in this Sidra.
5. The Torah warns of seven distinct stages of disobedience, each bringing with it — as a direct result — its own level of fitting punishment: **(1)** If they do not make the study of Torah their predominant concern and do not see the necessity for continually learning HaShem’s Torah as He has commanded, they are bound to misunderstand the Mitzvos of HaShem and **(2)** feel unable to carry out the seemingly meaningless commandments of the Torah. **(3)** Troubled by their conscience, they look down and even detest those faithful Jews who *do* observe the Torah. But then, when they realize that loyalty to HaShem and His Mitzvos is guarded and promoted by the Torah leaders in each generation, the deserting Jews see the Torah teacher as their enemy and **(4)** they come to hate the Chachommim and their successors in each generation, the Torah leaders of the Jewish People. In their perverted and corrupt disobedience of HaShem’s Mitzvos, and nevertheless tormented by their conscience, they cannot tolerate that the Jews loyal to HaShem should continue to live a life of Torah and Mitzvos: in their own warped minds they are convinced that their religious fellow-Jews must be dissuaded from observing the Torah of HaShem and **(5)** they attempt to hinder anyone from keeping the Mitzvos of HaShem. **(6)** To save their conscience, these degenerates and reformers convince themselves that the Mitzvos that the loyal Jews so persistently observe were not commanded by HaShem at Sinai. But so long as they still admit of the existence of HaShem, these apostate Jews are troubled in their own minds that HaShem did in fact

command the Torah and Mitzvos, until finally (7) they repudiate the very foundation of the Jewish People and they force themselves to deny the very existence of HaShem Himself.

6. Unfortunately, in the more-than-three-thousand-year-long history of the Jewish People, this pattern has been repeatedly followed so exactly that it is uncanny: whenever there has been a lapse in Torah-learning it has led directly down the path to degeneration and denial. And just as directly, too, has the punishment of which HaShem warns us in this Sidra followed on: If our adherence to HaShem is anything less than wholehearted; if we only “casually” follow the Torah as nothing more than a “tradition” or “Jewish culture”; if we do not see that our observing the Torah and Mitzvos is our deliberate purpose and our primary aim in life, then HaShem removes from us His special protection and He deserts us instead to the natural, casual, course of events. Instead of being directed in our national existence by HaShem Himself and enjoying the blessings that this brings, He allows us to be tossed and turned and thrown around by the nations of the world in the most fearsome “casual” manner.
7. And yet, with all this, HaShem promises that He will never forsake us. His punishments are only so as to correct us and improve us, never to destroy us. Therefore, even while we are in *Gollus* (during which time the Holy Land of Israel is resting the Sh'mittah and Yovel years that were denied it when the Jewish people were in possession of the Land) HaShem still remembers the covenant that He made with our forefathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov, and He is always ready to take us back under His protection the moment we sincerely return to Him.
8. After this chapter in this Sidra, there follow the laws of Valuations: If a person wishes to dedicate something to HaShem (other than a Korbon) then a valuation of the item, or the real estate, or whatever, is made and its value is given to the Treasury of the Beis HaMikdash. In the case of someone wishing to donate the “value” of a person, however, this valuation is not made by the valuers or assessors of the Treasury of the Beis HaMikdash but the Torah itself stipulates the amount that is to be paid over. The amounts are very small nominal sums — purely symbolic — and vary depending only on gender and age. Considerations of physical, spiritual, intellectual, moral or social conditions play no part whatsoever. From this (and other places in the Torah, too) we see how the Torah teaches that the true value of a human being is beyond any price.
9. The Sidra concludes with the laws of the Tithe of agricultural produce (which has to be eaten in the vicinity of the Mikdash) and the laws of the Tithes of cattle and sheep (which are to be brought as Korbonos). In this way, we acknowledge that all our prosperity comes from HaShem and that we should use all our material substance in His Service.

10. Thus does the Sefer Vayikroh, which in the main consists of the laws of the Mikdash and the Kohanim and their duties on behalf of the Jewish People, end with the message that all the Jewish people — not only the Kohanim — are to consecrate themselves to living their lives and enjoying the material blessings of HaShem in holiness, in fulfilment of our calling as the Chosen People of HaShem, His “kingdom of priests and His holy Nation.”

For the explanation of the Haftorah of Sidra בחוקותי please go to HAFTORAHS.

חזק

WITH THIS SIDRA IS COMPLETED

ספר ויקרא

THE THIRD OF

THE FIVE BOOKS OF THE TORAH