

The Promised Land — A New Garden of Eden

A D'var Torah on *Parashat B'chukotai* (Lev. 26:3 – 27:34)

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"Im-b'chukotai teileichu v'et-mitzvotai tishm'ru va-aseetem otam...."

"If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments...."

"I will be God to you, and you will be a people to Me." We are now about to learn what kind of life is meant for the Chosen People.

"But if you will not listen to Me, if your soul rejects My laws and if you do not carry out My commandments and break My covenant, then I will do the same to you. I will bring upon you illness that fills the spirit with grief. You will then sow your seed in vain. I will set My countenance against you and you will be beaten by your enemies. Those that hate you will rule over you, and you will flee even though no one pursues you. If you still will not heed Me, then I shall punish you further..."¹ This just the beginning! Next comes an escalating litany of promised agonies. Each is more depressing than the one before. The list is so dismaying, so painful, it is the custom among some readers to reserve this passage for themselves in order to spare others the call to the bema to read it! Is this a way to address the Chosen? Should we regret having said, "We will obey and understand"? How much consolation is there in the assertion that in our misery, the Creator will be with us? Misery is misery.

The Garden of Eden, where the Author began the story of man was a place of innocence. There was only one rule, one law: Don't eat from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam was given no explanation of why or what would happen if he transgressed. When, in his imperfection, he disobeyed, he was irrevocably cast down from innocence and plenty to a world of guile and scarcity.

Having survived the desert, the people are about to enter the Promised Land. The Author now reveals that the Promised Land is, in fact, a new Garden of Eden. This time the Author recounts many explicit laws, and the consequences of not abiding by them. The Author wants us to understand that part of the promise of the land is the clarity of laws that will govern us. We are freed from uncertainty of what is expected of us and the rule of the jungle. The Law is for us and outside of us. The Law is clear, illuminating our Path.

¹ Leviticus 26:14-18

When bad happens to us in this world, we are inclined to become confused. We are tempted to conclude that we are alone, we don't matter, and we are irrelevant to anything Higher. We might even deny there is a Higher realm. The Author here tells us that, just as in the Garden of Eden, our fate is always the result of our actions. We are in control, and what we do does matter. The Author invites us to accept all that happens to us as a reassuring fulfillment of the Promise.

Ambiguity resolved.