

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Bechukotai
June 4, 2016

פרשת בחקותי
כ"ז באייר תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Vayikra* (Leviticus) 26:3-27:34

In this *parasha*, God enumerates the rewards for keeping the commandments and the punishments for violating them; the laws of tithes are then listed.

The *parasha* in various places mentions different legal terms: *Chukim*, *Mishpatim*, *Mitzvot*, and *Torot*. There are many, many different explanations for the differences between these terms. The translations do us no good in determining the nuances: "Ordinances, statutes, commandments, and laws," enlighten us not at all.

Let us take the terms one at a time. *Torot* is the plural of Torah, which comes from the root *l'horot*—to teach or guide. *Torot* are those laws which are used as guides in our moral life.

Mitzvot are specific commandments. *Mitzvah* comes from the root *l'tzavot*—to command, and although *mitzvot* are good deeds, they involve much more than good deeds. They are good deeds which we are commanded by God to do.

Chukim and *Mishpatim* are much trickier to translate. *Chok*, the singular of *chukim*, in modern parlance, means a rule. In Biblical parlance, many commentators believe that *Chukim* are what is known as *mitzvot shimiyot*—those commandments that the Israelites heard, but could not make human sense of. The classic example of a *chok* is *parah adumah*—the red heifer that is slaughtered, burned, mixed with

special water, and sprinkled as a means of purifying one who has been exposed to a dead body. *Da'at Mikrah*, a 20th century Israeli commentary goes one step further. It says that a *chok* is not only a mitzvah which we cannot understand, but one which would not otherwise resonate for us. After all, who really wants to be sprinkled with the ashes of a dead cow? The fact that the Israelites fulfilled these *mitzvot* showed their allegiance to God. It is much easier to fulfill a command which we understand than one which repulses us.

Rabbi Menachem Liebttag, a current Israeli Bible scholar, claims that *chukim* are “spiritual laws of nature” parallel to physical laws of nature such as the law of gravity. No matter how much we want to argue against such a law, it exists, and no amount of denying its existence will obviate it. Further, even before we understood laws of nature, thanks to Sir Isaac Newton in the 17th Century, those laws certainly operated, whether we understood them or not.

Mishpatim, by contrast, may be *mitzvot* which are referred to as *mitzvot sichliyot*—those commandments which make sense following human ken. It makes sense that one must return lost objects, that one must help an animal in distress, and the like.

There is another way to classify the various laws in the Torah. The Torah contains both apodictic and casuistic law. Apodictic law comes in absolute terms: Thou shall not murder. Thou shall not steal. Casuistic law depends upon circumstances: If a fire breaks out... he that kindled the fire shall make restitution; if one person's ox kills another's, the two will sell the living ox and divide the price between them.

It is conceivable that these may be the difference between *chukim* (rules), which are given as absolutes and *mishpatim* (judgments), which involve judgment calls.

In whatever way we understand the nuances of *Torot*, *Mitzvot*, *Chukim*, and *Mishpatim*, we can find comfort in knowing that Judaism is a religion of principle and law. It gives us solid ground, rather than shifting sands to stand on at critical junctures throughout our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Look at the *Aseret Hadibrot*—Ten Commandments in *Shmot* (Exodus) 20:1-14. Are these *mitzvot shimiyot* or *mitzvot sichliyot*? Why do you think so?
- Look at chapter 21 in *Shmot* (Exodus). See how many casuistic laws you can find. Do they all make sense to you?
- Look in chapter 22, verse 11 in *Devarim* (Deuteronomy). This is considered a *chok*. Why?