

“Bechukotai: Always end on a high!”

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The main body of our sidrah is referred to by scholars as “the blessings and curses,” though it is significant that nowhere are those terms or their implications referred to in the section. For, just as Israel’s blessings are not perpetual and irreversible – if the recipients subsequently prove undeserving through the abandonment of their faith and practices – so, neither is their sorry fate and exile from their land which, God promises, will be brought to an end ‘when their unfeeling heart is humbled’ (Lev. 26:41). Perhaps, for this reason, Jewish tradition refers to it, and its parallel in the sidrah *Va’etchanan*, by the term *toch’chah*, ‘reproof.’

Although this section of reproof contains the threat of dire punishment, it concludes with a promise of Israel’s rehabilitation and reconciliation with God:

I will remember My covenant with Jacob and also My covenant with Isaac, and also My covenant with Abraham will I remember, and I will remember the land (v. 42) ...And I shall remember for them the covenant of the ancients, those whom I have taken out of the land of Egypt in the sight of the nations, to be God unto them. I am the Lord (26:45).

However, the verse that follows bears the literary hallmark of a conclusion to an entire book of the Torah rather than to the narrow context of a section such as the *toch’chah*:

These are the laws, rules, and instructions that the Lord established, through Moses on Mount Sinai, between Himself and the Israelite people (v. 46).

This finale genre is demonstrable by referring to the concluding verses not only of our book of Vayyikra, but also of those of Bemidbar and Devarim:

These are the commandments that the Lord commanded Moses to the Children of Israel on Mount Sinai (End of Vayyikra).

These are the commandments and the ordinances that the Lord commanded through Moses to the Children of Israel in the Plains of Moab, at the Jordan, by Jericho (End of Bemidbar).

And no prophet was ever to arise in Israel like Moses...as evinced by all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him...and by all the strong hand and awesome power that Moses performed before the eyes of all Israel (End of Devarim).

It may appear problematic, therefore, that the Torah did not conclude the book of Vayyikra with Lev. 26:45-46 (see above), but, rather, appended a concluding chapter 27 that, at first glance, seems to have no contextual association with the toch'chah given that it deals with how monetary and other vows or dedications are to be made to the sanctuary and how such pledges may be redeemed.

Two explanations may be offered. The first is that there is, indeed, a link between the dire punishment referred to in the toch'chah and the book's final chapter. The former, when referring to the punishment of exile that will be visited upon the backsliding nation, states thus:

I will lay your cities in ruin and make your sanctuaries desolate...I will make your land desolate so that your enemies who settle in it will be appalled by it...Then shall the land be compensated for the sabbath years throughout the time it is desolate and you are in the land of your enemies (Lev. 26:31-34).

This theme, of Israel's desolate land serving as a punishment for the shemittah and Jubilee years that the Israelites ignored, is picked up by the concluding chapter of our book which refers to a situation wherein a person dedicates to the sanctuary some land he has bought. As he does not own the land, given that it reverts to its original owner at the jubilee, the Torah states that its monetary value is to be assessed by the priest, and that, rather than the land itself, its value is to be donated.

A second reason for the insertion of the final chapter may have been that it came to serve the literary purpose of ending on a positive theme in a situation where an unpleasant

episode had been described. Thus, at the end of the book of Bereshit, following the death of their father, Joseph's brothers suspect that he would then exact retribution for what they had done to him (see Gen. 50:15). The book ends with Joseph effecting a reconciliation and the good news of his longevity to the extent that he was blessed 'to see children of the third generation of Ephraim, the children of Machir son of Menasseh, born upon Joseph's knees' (Gen. 50:23).

Toward the end of the book of Shemot, we have the instructions regarding the call to the Israelites to donate the materials and objects for the construction of the sanctuary and its vessels and the making of the priestly robes (ch. 25:1 - 31:11). There then follows the episode of the worship of the Golden Calf (ch.32:1 – 33:5).

The subject of the construction of the sanctuary is then resumed, representing a virtual repetition of the directives of chapters 25:1 – 31: 11. Its purpose seems to have been to sandwich the account of the Golden Calf between the two accounts of the sanctuary donations so that the sidrah would not end with the derogatory Calf episode but with a tribute to the generosity of the Hebrews.

The final sidrah of the book of Bemidbar (chs 33-34) lists the 42 stopping-places of the Hebrews during their 40-year journey through the desert and the demarcation of their future tribal borders. It then deals with the establishment of six cities of refuge for one who unintentionally killed someone, so that he might escape any attempt to avenge the blood of the victim. The sidrah then ends with part two of the saga of the daughters of Zelafchad's petition to have the inheritance law changed so that females might succeed to their late father's future tribal inheritance in the land of Canaan (Nu.36: 1 -11).

Given that, but two sidrot earlier (Nu. 27:1-11) we were introduced to the Zelafchad issue, we may wonder why it was split into two parts. However, as with the conclusion of the

three previous books, it seems that its purpose was, similarly, to avoid ending Bemidbar with the unpleasant situation of manslaughter, but rather with an example of a piece of enlightened legislation, which, at the same time, demonstrates the faith of the Hebrew women that the nation would succeed in its conquest of the land and its division among the tribes.

The book of Devarim offers the final example of the Torah's literary avoidance of ending on an unpleasant note. In the penultimate sidrah, Ha'azinu (Deut. 32:48-52), God tells Moses to ascend Mount Nevo and to take a final glance at the Promised Land since he would not be granted the privilege of entering into it because of his sin of 'failing to sanctify Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel.'

Now, we would have expected that this instruction would have been followed immediately by 34: 1 -12 which describes how Moses did as God demanded, how he died on the mountain, was buried by God, and later mourned by the entire nation for thirty days. But, instead, the narrative is interrupted by a description of the blessings (*V'zot ha-brachah*) that Moses bestowed on each of the tribes 'before his death' (33:1 – 29). The Torah then concludes with a superlative tribute to Moses:

Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died. His eyes were undimmed and his vigour unabated...Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses whom the Lord singled out, face to face...(34:7 -11).

This principle of concluding a book of the Torah on an optimistic note sends a life message to us all. The Torah is realistic enough to acknowledge that life has its ups and downs, its pleasure and pain, a fact mirrored in the lives of nearly all its characters. To refer to but a few: The fear for their lives and the honour of their wives suffered by both Abraham (Gen. 12:13ff; 20:1-18) and Isaac (26:7-11); Sarah's anguish at being unable to conceive, and her

attribution of blame to Abraham for the slight she was receiving on that score from Hagar the handmaid (Gen. 16: 1-6); The words of Rebekkah – “I am weary of my life” – bemoaning the aggravation she suffered through her son Esau’s Hittite wives, (Gen. 27:46); The domestic strife in the home of Jacob (Gen. 37: 1-11); Joseph’s sale into Egypt (vv. 23-36) and his father’s inability to find comfort after being hoodwinked into believing that Joseph had been killed (vv. 31-35).

All these examples – drawn from the book of Genesis alone – teach us to bear life’s ‘slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’ with equanimity, hope, and faith, and encourage us at all times to look forward to, and to work toward, the dawn of a new day.

**שבת שלום ורפואה שלמה לפצועי צה"ל,
נחמה למשפחותיהם ולכל אבלי ציון וירושלים**

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the sidrot and parashi'ot to Moses, whereas authorities such as R. Joseph ibn Kaspi (Provence, 1280-1345) asserted that, 'we will never know who originally divided the Torah into the separate five books and the subdivisions into parashi'ot.' clearly did not have a single, authoritative tradition from Sinai, given that two independent systems of reading had evolved Me in the eyes of the Children of Israel': an annual and a triennial² one. The triennial Torah system is an arrangement whereby the reading is spread over three years, with each sidrah subdivided into three, rather than seven, parashi'ot read each week. The former system, which ultimately became the norm,