Bechukotai: Vayikra (Leviticus)

What's it all about?

God promises that if the Israelites keep His commandments, they will know great peace and prosperity, but if they don't, great and many evils will befall them. And yet, God also promises never to cast His chosen people away and never to abandon them. The parsha concludes with the laws of pledges and a discussion of the commandment of tithing.



ART BY HILLEL SMITH © 2025

"Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away; nor will I ever abhor them, to destroy them and to break My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God."

Take a deeper dive

This week's parsha closes the book of Leviticus with a bang, concluding with these famous words: **"And I will remember My covenant [with] Jacob,"** God reassures the Israelites, **"and also My covenant [with] Isaac**, and also **My covenant [with] Abraham I will remember."**

It hardly takes a rabbi to realize that t**he chronological order here is reversed, going from Jacob to Isaac to Abraham**. Why? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explained that **it is an apt description of the effort the Jews will have to make to free themselves of exile and the exilic mindset and ascend to the true heights of their covenant with HaShem.** First, like Jacob, they will suffer the envy of others and experience great hardships away from home. But, God promises, "I will transform even the darkest night of their exile into a shining revelation of Divine guidance." At which point they'll ascend to the second stage and be like Isaac—they will dwell at a home of their own, but they will still feel challenged. "In the midst of growing prosperity, living among nations wavering between humaneness and envy, they will have to preserve their unique character as did Yitzhak." And only when they ace this text will they experience the Abrahamic covenant: "Ultimately, the nations will tolerate and respect Israel—not even though they are the people of the God of Avraham; because they are the people of the God of Avraham; because they know and observe Hashem's Torah, which brings salvation to mankind."

This order isn't just a feel-good throwaway line. What we see here, the late, great Rabbi Jonathan Sacks observed, is one of the greatest moments in human morality: **the birth of hope.** It is, he notes, what the sociologist Peter Berger calls "a signal of transcendence," a point at which something beyond penetrates into the human situation. Hope, Rabbi Sacks explains, is neither inevitable nor rational. You may very well tell yourself that you're a realist, that hope is an illusion, that it's a sweet fairy tale we tell our children to keep them from getting crushed under what we argue is the "real" world, ugly and heavy and dark. Adults, these so-called realists say, should just learn to accept things. To understand that there's nothing they can do. To tend their own gardens. All these are profoundly un-Jewish sentiments. **Judaism insists not only that we can repair the world, but that we must. It's our sole job.** Still, the parsha reminds us, terrible things do and will happen; our duty is to remain steadfast and keep at it even, or especially when, the world outside seems so profoundly unfair.

Join the club

You'll receive our weekly newsletter with the Torah reading, updates on our community and local events, and everything else you need to dive into the greatest story ever told. Visit **simchattorahchallenge.org** to sign up today!