

BECHUKOSAI 1981

In the Torah portion Bechukosai we learn about the blessings and curses. This is not, though, the important thing we learn in this Torah portion. In this Torah portion we learn about hope, that we have the ability to change, that we can make ourselves better than we are. None of us is doomed in the moral sphere to be less than we want. Once a young man came to me and he said, "Rabbi, I know that I have faults but in college in psychology I learned that a person must accept himself for what he is and, therefore, I have come to accept myself the way I am and that's the way it has to be". Of course, I felt he misinterpreted psychology but turning to him I said, "If this is so that you are happy as you are, then why did you come to see me?" Obviously he was not happy. All of us have the ability to change if we want to. The word mikvah in Hebrew means both a pool of water and hope. Just as water cleanses us and renews us so does hope. Without hope we have nothing. One of the reasons why the younger generation does not want to have children is because they have no hope. They do not believe in the future. They do not believe in the past either. All they believe in is the present and the present cannot make you happy. In this Torah portion where it says "then I will remember my treaty with Jacob" Jacob is written with a vahv. It has an extra letter. Five times in the Torah this happens and five times in the Torah Elijah's name is written without a vahv. This teaches us that Jacob can only remember his covenant with G-d when he has hope, when he looks beyond himself, because Elijah is the precursor of messianic days.

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Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion, Bechukosai, we learn about the curses and blessings that will come upon the Jewish people if they either obey or disobey G-d's commandments. This whole section is very difficult. The whole problem of suffering is very difficult. What's more, the curses are much more than the blessings. Life is difficult and there is much suffering we have no answer for at all. Unfortunately, in life there are many people who turn their blessings into curses. Many times the attitude we have can determine whether or not the experiences we have are blessings or curses. For example, a woman came to me a few months ago and she was very distraught. A man had proposed to her and she had fallen in love with him. She was very disturbed. She was a wealthy woman. Was this man marrying her for love or money? She told me she was even thinking of giving away all her money. She, of course, did not, but here was a woman who, by her attitude, was bringing upon herself needless suffering. The opposite is also true. The people who will not acknowledge love or affection because the person does not have money like the story of the woman who said she would not marry her boyfriend until he had a million dollars. He went to the city and tried. At the end he was only \$10 richer. He went home and told his fiance and she said, "That's enough" and she married him. In life there are many things that money cannot solve. Of course, they say it is better to have problems with money than without. Look at the Kennedy's. One child was retarded, two boys were assassinated, one boy was killed in the war. Our problems can overwhelm us if we are not careful. We should always look at our challenges and opportunities. Too often people do not know how to approach things in life. Life is difficult as it is and when good things happen we should appreciate it. Unfortunately, there are people who never are satisfied. When people do something good for them they say, "Why didn't you do more? How come you have not done it sooner? Why didn't you buy a more expensive one than this?" Instead of making people feel good they make people feel bad and, as a result, they, themselves, are shunned and nobody wants to do anything for them. They are bitter people. This, of course, is one of the curses, one of the ways we change our blessings into curses. It says "and I will break the pride of your power, Ge'on Uzchem". It just does not say "I will break your power", but "I will break the pride of your power". I will

make you into nothing. Even when you do something nice it will be nothing. You will not be able to please or to help. We know that we can all live life four different ways. We can live life always seeking sensual pleasure. This does not satisfy because it ultimately is selfishness and selfishness is not unique. Anyone can be selfish. Each of us wants to count and be counted on to make a unique contribution. Other people just want to exercise power. Life to them is getting people to obey their will. That, of course, is why certain people never are satisfied. This, though, leads to cruelty and hatred. Other people want to live life as security and all they even aim at is security. These people wind up being devious. The only satisfying way to live is a life of meaning, to live not just for yourself, but to live a contributing life, a life which adds to goodness in the world where you take any situation in which you are found and make the best of it and make it good for others. Near the end are the curses we read where G-d said, "Thou remember my treaty with Jacob and even my treaty with Yitzchok and even my treaty with Abraham". The question, of course, is why does G-d start with Jacob and go back to Abraham? Abraham was the first Jew. He should have started with him. The answer, I believe, is because Jacob's life was filled with troubles and problems more so than the other patriarchs. He, though, learned how to turn his problems into blessings. Even when he appeared before Pharaoh he spoke of his troubles, but he did not let his suffering overcome him. He turned his problems into challenges. He then mentions Yitzchok because he led a life of self-sacrifice. He taught us that we cannot have a satisfying life living just for ourselves. You have to live for more than yourself and finally we learn about Abraham. Abraham helped everyone even though he was known as Ivri, which means he was on one side and the world on the other. He disagreed with the others, but he was not disagreeable. He learned to have a positive attitude even when he disagreed with others. That is the secret to having a satisfying life. Each of us suffers in life. Each of us carries our own burden, but we can each determine what kind of life we are going to live. G-d knows what He is doing even though we cannot understand what He is doing. Each of us should try to turn our problems into challenges by adopting the right attitude and should live lives which go beyond ourselves, and we should learn

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how to disagree without being disagreeable. So much unhappiness and bitterness is caused by disagreeable people. In this way at least we will not be guilty of the great crime of turning our blessings into curses. The story about the scientist who took all the information he could find and got a computer and fed it into the computer. After all human knowledge was in the computer he asked the computer, "Is there a G-d?" The computer then answered, "There is one now". It is not knowledge or gimmicks that are going to allow us to lead a good life or understand G-d. It is adopting a positive attitude.

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In the Torah portion Bechukosai we learn about the blessings which would come upon the Jewish people if they followed the way of the Torah and the curses that would come if they did not. The Torah portion opens in a peculiar way. It says "Im Bechukosai Telechu V'es Mitzvosai Tishmoru" "if you will walk in My statutes and My commandments you will observe." What is this about walking in statutes? Why doesn't it just say if you will observe My commandments? Rashi explains that the expression "Telechu Torah" means occupying yourself with learning Torah. We are supposed to delve into the Torah, to constantly learn from it. It is not enough just to do Mitzvahs, because if you only just do Mitzvahs you will soon cease doing them if they are not accompanied with Torah learning. Perhaps the greatest error that the Jews made when they came to this country was to almost completely forsake the learning of Torah. Pious families whose forebearers were rabbis and learned people for countless generations quickly culturated, assimilated, and completely lost their Jewish identity. The reason was not because they stopped doing Mitzvahs, because many of them kept the Mitzvahs scrupulously at least for the first few years. What caused them to give up on Judaism was their stopping of the learning of Torah. When we do a Mitzvah we operate on two levels. We do the Mitzvah, itself, but we also bring ourselves to the Mitzvahs. Whether the Mitzvah has any meaning for us and what allows us to be connected to G-d, our fellow human beings, or our community depends on what we bring to the Mitzvah. One person can do a Mitzvah and get nothing out of it while another will be strengthened to G-d, his fellow human being, and his community. For example, the person whoc comes to Shul and does not know anything about the prayers or Hebrew or anything about services must be terribly bored sitting here for three hours or is very good at daydreaming. In fact, people have told me, "Rabbi, the services are stupid and boring. When are we going to say Kaddish so I can get out of here?" They may have done the Mitzvah, but it has no meaning for them and you can rest assured that their children will not even say Kaddish. Maybe in other times and places just tradition alone would carry Judaism, my father did it, my grandfather did it so I will do it, but American is anti-tradition. People will not do things just because their

parents and grandparents did them, and if they do not find sense in them they will stop. Two people will come to the Seder and one will taste the Matzah and feel the pathos and glory of history and feel uplifted. Another will taste the Matzah and say, "What a dry distasteful cracker. Why should I be doing something stupid like this?" Judaism has always rested on three pillars: a great belief in a G-d Who cares and is concerned for the world; a great concern for Jewish learning because by learning Torah we can find what G-d wants from us and elevate ourselves and our souls; and a great willingness to be different because we know our customs and ceremonies and Mitzvahs have great meaning and are needed by the world. The Jewish religion just about collapsed 80 years ago. People stopped believing in G-d. Jewish learning was thought to be irrelevant and stupid and Jews were not willing to be different. To the great credit of Zionism, it said that Jews should be different. Zionists proclaimed that we should speak our own language, have our own State, and be willing to stand up as Jews. In fact, to many people's mind in America Zionism and orthodoxy are the same thing. They, of course, are not but it was only the traditional minded Jews who were willing to be different in America. Many of the other Zionists, of course, did not believe in G-d or said they did not believe in a personal Jewish G-d. G-d to them was a force of history propelling them to save the Jewish people. They, of course, had to confront the sources and, at least, had to have some Jewish learning. Thank goodness now in America we no longer have to fight the battle of belief in G-d thanks to the advances of modern science which I have spoken of many times from this pulpit. That belief is now wide-spread. We also do not have to worry too much about Jews being willing to be different. What we have to worry about now is Jewish learning. There is so much ignorance now. Jews will not come back to do the Mitzvahs unless they see that it adds meaning to their lives, unless they understand them. Once Jewish learning increases so will observance. It is our job now in this generation, as distinct from other generations, to stress Jewish learning, to show how Judaism connects a person with G-d, his fellow human beings, and his

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community. I am reminded of the story of the professor who was very egotistical and was only concerned about how he looked and whether his hair combed good and if his shirt looked nice. He saw people getting a little upset and said, "Oh, I have only been talking about myself. Let's talk about you. How do you like my speech?" Of course, it is not outward appearances that count. It is not the buildings, the outer trappings. It is the inner spirit, inner workings which allow people to realize the importance of Judaism and thus practice it.

Words and Our Inner & Outer Lives LIVES

MAY 1984

Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

One of the most perplexing problems that we all run up against is how to deal with a person who says one thing but does another, a person who speaks so beautifully with so much rational, good common sense about a problem but who, when it comes time to act, acts totally irrationally, a person who knows how to say just the right things at the right time but who never follows through on his words. It is as if this type of person believes that since he has said the right thing he is now free from doing the right thing. Since he has said the right words his actions do not have to conform to his words.

Words are a wonderful gift. The rabbis speak of speech as the great gift which distinguishes man from the animals. Words are, though, a double edged sword. Words can build trust and confidence, but they also can maim and hurt. Promises made and not kept lead to great disillusionment and frustration. It is almost impossible to deal with people if they will not keep their word. How can you trust them? And how can you deal with people you cannot trust? The frustration of dealing with people of this type can become so intense that it can lead to violence. One of the roots of family violence today is the failure of couples to deal with each other in truth. This, of course, is what makes infidelity so bad. The lies and the coverups destroy trust. The frustration becomes unbearable and violence becomes the inevitable result. Each of us knows that words are a wonderful thing, but they can also be a terrible thing. When biting sarcasm is used it destroys, not builds. Parents who would never think of hitting their children maim then much more with their biting sarcasm than they would have if they had hit them.

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Each of us leads two lives: an inner life and an outer life. That's why the word for "life" in Hebrew is plural, "Chayeem". Each of us experiences events subjectively and objectively. An objective experience which is viewed by many people will trigger all sorts of different subjective reactions. Two people attending the same seder will have two totally different experiences. One person may be filled with all sorts of nostalgic memories of the past while the second person who is participating in a seder for the first time may be filled with all sorts of questions and uneasy feelings. Each of us knows that just the sight of certain places or objects triggers all sorts of thoughts and feelings in us. One person passing a certain corner may remember the school that used to stand there and all the experiences he had years ago there, while a second person newly arrived in town only sees the new office building standing there now. He has no memory of a school ever having been there. To him this corner is only the place where he does his banking. What goes on in our minds is not governed solely by the objective experiences we have. Two people can do exactly the same Mitzvah, like eating Matza, and one may get a lot out of it and one may get nothing out of it. One person will come prepared with understanding and learning and will be thrilled and overwhelmed by eating the Matza, while the second person who knows nothing of Jewish history will, when he tastes the dry Matza, think, "I've tasted better crackers than this in my life."

We exist on two levels: the objective level and the subjective level. Words are the bridge between these two levels. Words stir up within us all sorts of feelings and they also convey an objective reality to other people. Some people get their levels of reality mixed up.

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Some people feel that since they have said the right words which have conjured up an inner experience for themselves, they then have fulfilled their obligation to act. Others, and sometimes they are these very same people, when they hear things told to them by their friends ~~they~~ think that these friends should know how they are feeling inside and that their friends should not tell them about things they would rather not hear. I remember once a woman becoming hysterical when I told her that it would be a wonderful thing for her to let her child go to a particular summer camp. The woman had a fit and accused me of all sorts of terrible things. I had no way of knowing that as a youngster she had had a horrible camp experience and almost died. She thought I was threatening her son's life and I should be ashamed of myself. My comments evoked a subjective experience which colored her dealings with me.

Many times people are actually terribly insulted by very innocuous comments and you never know why. They feel that you should have known better than to have said certain things, or you should have known that today they are not feeling well, or today is a yahrzeit or a particularly sad day in their lives. In other words, you should know what their inner life is. This, of course, is impossible. Unless a person is willing to communicate his inner life you cannot know it. I knew an individual who, every time she entered a neighbor's house, would start to cry. Nobody knew why she would do this. Nobody knew it was the piano that made her cry. Eventually, she told us that when she was small her parents denied her piano lessons and that hurt was so deep that every time she saw a piano she would start to cry. Many times it is very difficult to deal with certain people

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because we do not know how certain things will strike them. We do not know about their inner lives.

In the Torah portion Bechukosai we learn about the great blessings that will come upon the Jewish people if they will keep the Torah and about the great curses that will come upon them if they will not keep it. The last blessing that is mentioned is "and I will break the bars of your yoke and I will make you walk upright." This is a great blessing because it speaks about a person who can make his thought and speech and action one. The slave's inner life and outer life could never be one unless he ~~wanted~~^{wanted} to believe that he deserves and always should be a slave. One of the great goals of Judaism is to integrate our inner and outer lives so that they are one, to allow us to fuse our heart and our mind so that we will always want to do the right thing. To become a Mensch means to internalize the teachings of compassion and morality which our religion teaches us.

In the curse in Bechukosai we speak about "souls languishing and eyes failing." The inner vision and the outer life are different. It speaks about "if you will walk with Me contrary" and the word "contrary" in Hebrew is "Keri" which means "opposition" and also "pollution". Your whole life is filled with contradictions. You do not have a feeling of wholeness. You say one thing and do another. This is the same word we also use when we read ~~about~~^{about} a word from the Torah and do not sound it the way it is written in the Torah. When a person acts one way and speaks another way in life he is afflicted with terrible conflict and turmoil. All sorts of mental gymnastics have to be resorted to by that person to resolve the contradiction

of why his inner life and outer life are not the same. People who are filled with these great contradictions many times are people of great ability and they really suffer. Their words and their actions do not match.

At the end of the curses there is a peculiar sentence. It says, referring to the Jewish people, "and they shall confess their iniquity that they walk contrary to Me" and then it says "and I will also walk with them contrary and then they will pay the punishment of their sins." What's going on here? Here the Jewish people have just confessed their sins. Why does G-d then say He is going to walk contrary to them and punish them? If they confessed their sins, why is He punishing them? The Rabbis tell us that here we are talking about the Jewish people only confessing their sins. They have only said that they have done bad things, but they are not willing to correct the bad things that they have done. Confessing sins and then not trying to do anything about them is not the Jewish way. Words are meant to help you bring your inner life in line with the moral objective life enunciated in the Torah. They are not meant to absolve you from the responsibility of correcting your faults.

Telling a psychiatrist or rabbi about all your problems, what you have done wrong and what you are guilty of, and then not evincing any interest in changing and correcting what you have done wrong brings no atonement. It can bring, according to our tradition, no relief. It is not enough to know what is wrong. You also have to be willing to fix what is wrong. That's why immediately after this sentence it says, "and I will remember My covenant with Jacob and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham." Why should

it mention them in this order? It should have mentioned Abraham first, not Jacob. It mentions Jacob first because he struggled all his life. He struggled all his life to make himself worthy of the name "Israel". Life is not easy and it is sometimes very hard to live by your ideals, to have your inner life and outer life correspond, to not fool yourself by words. Jacob never fooled himself. Therefore, in Jewish tradition, Jacob is known as "Emes", as the pursuer of truth. He knew he did wrong when he took the blessing from his brother. He knew he had to leave Laban's house. He knew he could never be an Egyptian and his children could never be complete Egyptians. He never fooled himself with words. Isaac, for the most part, shut out the outer world and lived just in his inner world. Abraham's inner and outer world converged. He practiced kindness and goodness all his life. He was able to integrate his inner and outer lives almost completely and, therefore, he is the founder of our people. Jacob had a much more difficult time. Jacob is our model. All of us have to constantly struggle and make our inner and outer lives converge.

At the conclusion of the Torah portion Bechukosai we learn how everyone is of equal value, that no one should have to fool himself in order to feel that he or she has value. No one should have to put on airs or tell lies in order to feel they have value. Each of us has value because G-d has created us and needs us. None of us should ever use words to cover up our feelings of inadequacy or to live in just one of the levels of our being. We should always strive to have our inner life and our outer life reflect Jewish values. Our words and our actions should always coincide.

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Soon it will be Israel Independence Day. The creation of the State of Israel has given the Jewish People a glorious opportunity. The Jewish People can now put into practice in the real world the Jewish values of community and nationhood. These values no longer must be confined to our people's inner life. Our values are not just for books. They are for real life. May the State of Israel in practice and theory always reflect the highest Jewish values.

