

Shabbat B'CHUKOTAI

LEVITICUS 26:3-13

KEY KOSHI:

**HOW is the framing of B'Chukotai's Blessing
a framework for living-covenant?
WHAT is its application for Jewish Spirituality?**

P'SHAT—AWARENESS... The beginning of knowing about God is simply paying attention, being fully present where you are

<p>26:3] If you follow My laws and faithfully observe My commandments, 4] I will grant your rains in their season, so that the earth shall yield its produce and the trees of the field their fruit. 5] Your threshing shall overtake the vintage, and your vintage shall overtake the sowing; you shall eat your fill of bread and dwell securely in your land. 6] I will grant peace in the land, and you shall lie down untroubled by anyone; I will give the land respite from vicious beasts, and no sword shall cross your land. 7] You shall give chase to your enemies, and they shall fall before you by the sword. 8] Five of you shall give chase to a hundred, and a hundred of you shall give chase to ten thousand; your enemies shall fall before you by the sword. 9] I will look with favor upon you, and make you fertile and multiply you; and I will maintain My covenant with you. 10] You shall eat old grain long stored, and you shall have to clear out the old to make room for the new. 11] I will establish My abode in your midst, and I will not spurn you. 12] I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people. 13] I the Lord am your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk erect.</p>	<p>1 לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּ לָכֶם אֱלִילִים וּפְסֵל וּמִצֵּבָה לֹא־ תִקְיִמוּ לָכֶם וְאִבֹן מִשְׁפִּית לֹא תִתְנוּ בְּאֶרְצְכֶם לְהִשְׁתַּחֲוֹת עָלֶיהָ כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם: 2 אֶת־ שִׁבְתֵּי תִשְׁמְרוּ וּמִקְדָּשֵׁי תִירָאוּ אֲנִי יְהוָה: 3 פ פ [פִּרְשֵׁת בַּחֲקוֹתַי] 3 אִם־בָּחַקְתִּי תִלְכוּ וְאֶת־מְצוֹתַי תִּשְׁמְרוּ וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אִתָּם: 4 וְנִתְתִּי גִשְׁמֵיכֶם בְּעֵתָם וְנִתְּנָה הָאָרֶץ יְבוּלָה וְעַץ הַשָּׂדֶה יִתֵן פְּרִי: 5 וְהִשִּׁיג לָכֶם דָּיֵשׁ אֶת־בְּצִיר וּבְצִיר יִשָּׂיג אֶת־זֶרַע וְאֶכְלֶתֶם לַחֲמֶכֶם לְשִׁבְעַת יָמֵי לְבֶטַח בְּאֶרְצְכֶם: [שְׁנַיִן] 6 וְנִתְתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ וְשָׁכַבְתֶּם וְאִין מִחֲרִיד וְהִשְׁפַּתִּי חֵיהָ רָעָה מִן־ הָאָרֶץ וְחָרַב לֹא־תַעֲבֹר בְּאֶרְצְכֶם: 7 וְרִדְפְתֶם אֶת־אִיְבֵיכֶם וְנָפְלוּ לִפְנֵיכֶם לְחָרַב: 8 וְרִדְפוּ מִכֶּם חֲמֹשֶׁה מֵאָה וּמֵאָה מִכֶּם רַבְּבָה יִרְדְּפוּ וְנָפְלוּ אִיְבֵיכֶם לִפְנֵיכֶם לְחָרַב: 9 וּפְגַיְתִי אֲלֵיכֶם וְהִפְרִיתִי אֶתְכֶם וְהִרְבִּיתִי אֶתְכֶם וְהִקִּימֹתִי אֶת־בְּרִיתִי אִתְּכֶם: [שְׁלִישִׁי] [חֲמִישִׁי כִשְׁהוֹן מִחוּבְרִין] 10 וְאֶכְלֶתֶם יֶשֶׁן נוֹשֵׁן וְיֶשֶׁן מִפְּנֵי חֹדֶשׁ תּוֹצִיאוּ: 11 וְנִתְתִּי מִשְׁפְּנֵי בְּתוּכְכֶם וְלֹא־תִגְעַל נַפְשֵׁי אֶתְכֶם: 12 וְהִתְהַלַּכְתִּי בְּתוּכְכֶם וְהִיִּיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ־לִי לְעָם: 13 אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מֵהֵלֵת לָהֶם עֲבָדִים וְאַשְׁבַּר מִטַּת עַלְכֶם וְאוֹלָךְ אֶתְכֶם קוֹמְמִיּוֹת</p>
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בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה, יי אֱלֹהֵינוּ, מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתַי וְצִוֵּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה.
Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, asher kid'shanu b'mitzvotav v'tzivanu laasok b'divrei Torah.
Blessed are you, Adonai our God, Sovereign of the universe, who hallows us with mitzvot, commanding us to engage with words of Torah.

REMEZ—UN-SELF-AWARENESS...

V.3-4 *IF in my statutes you walk and my mitzvot you keep---and do them, I will then grant your rains in their season...*

TALMUD... The rabbis taught: “*If in my statutes you walk*” IF—IM is a term of imploration, implying “Would that...” So, in the Psalms, “*Would that my people would hearken to Me...*” (81:14) [Avoda Zarah 5a]

ETZ HAYIM... “*If you follow My laws...*” The verb translated as “follow” literally means “walk,” prompting the comment that humans “walk” in God’s ways but angels “stand” in God’s Presence. Human beings, unlike angels, have the ability to change and grow into themselves...Jewish Law is known as “Halacha”...understood as “a way to go/walk.”

V.9 *I will look with favor upon you, and make you fertile and multiply you, and I will maintain my covenant with you*

RASHI... Rather, “*I will turn My attention to you...*” and I will make a new covenant with you...a new, unbreakable covenant, as it is written: “*I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt.*” [Jeremiah 31:31-32]

B’CHOR SHOR... “*I will look with favor...*” Literally, “*I will turn to you*” PANITI—I will turn My Face, PANIM, and never again My Back.

V.12-13 *I will be ever present in your midst: I will be your God, and you shall be My people. I Adonai your God who brought you out from the land of the Egyptians to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright.*

RASHI... “*I will walk among you...*” I will stroll with you in the Garden of Eden like one of you, and you will not be afraid...Still, “*I will be God to you.*” Your reverence will be a given.

TSEYDAH LaDERECH... Had the phrase said: “*v’Halachti B’toch’chem—I will walk among you,*” it would have implied the Divine Presence in this world. “*v’Hithalachti*” implies a Presence “*seen as walking*” which can only happen in a spiritual dimension, a World to Come

B’CHOR SHOR... Literally, “*I will walk among you...*” When you are settled, I will dwell among you, and when you go from place to place, I will go with you.

J.P.S... *I will be your God; you will be My people.*”

The reverse of this is “For you are not My people, and I will not be your God.” [Hosea 1:9]

J.MILGROM... “*I will be your God; you will be My people.*” According to the priestly texts, this is the binding formula of Covenant...The formula may be rooted in ancient adoption and marriage terminology.

RASHBAM... “*komemiyut—erect*” The word continues the metaphor of the yoke of slavery, now removed from the people, who can finally stand tall.

B.SCHWARTZ... “*komemiyut—erect*” Though God’s purpose in bringing them out of Egyptian slavery was to make Israel His own slaves, in the course of doing so, He did indeed break their yoke and enable them to walk “erect.”

J.MILGROM... “*Komemiyut*” In an upright posture, as in SIFRA, so they will not be afraid of any creature. As opposed to “your tormentors who have commanded you: Get down, that we may walk over you” [Isaiah 51:23]—so you made yourself like the ground, a street for the passersby. [S’FORNO]

B.D.B... “*Komemiyut—Uprightness*, as in Lev. 26:13 “*made you go upright—as freemen.*”

...From the root KUM—to rise, stand...the hif’il, to cause to stand,...L’hakim brit, to establish a covenant with.

MAGGID of MZERITCH...What is the intent of “*komemiyut?--upright*”

Cattle walk with head bent to the ground. When a man acts like a beast, his head, too, is bent toward the lowest things of life. But when he does not behave like a beast, he is said to walk upright, with head turned heavenward...in hope.

“*IM B’CHUKOTAI TAYLECHU, If you walk in My statutes...I will cause you to walk upright.*”

D'RASH—READING BETWEEN THE WORDS...

Rabbi SHAI HELD... [President, Dean of Mechon Hadar, Chair of Jewish Thought, Covenant Award Winner]

Parashat Be-hukkotai begins by imagining two possibilities for the people of Israel's future. If the people obey God's will, they will be showered with abundant blessing; if they disobey, they will meet with every form of devastation. The blessings brought by faithfulness to the covenant are magnificent and plentiful: peace and prosperity; safety and security; fertility and fruitful land; the divine presence firmly ensconced amid the people. But the poignant and powerful way the list comes to an end is at least as striking as the blessings themselves. One word in particular offers us deep insight into the way Judaism understands what it means to serve and live in covenant with God.

Leviticus employs a graphic and poignant image: *"I am the Lord your God who brought you out from the land of Egypt to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright (kommemyut)"* (Lev. 26:13).

This last word, *kommemyut*, is critical. In the ancient world, work animals were tied to heavy yokes. In Egypt, the Torah suggests, the Israelites were so abused and exploited under Pharaoh's brutal reign that they were reduced to beasts of burden. R. Obadiah Seforno explains... "The aptness of the biblical metaphor is apparent. A person who is subjugated, upon whom a yoke is placed, is bent over. Once the bars are broken, he can stand at full stature."

The verse implicitly contrasts what it means to be a slave to Pharaoh with what it means to be a servant of God. Pharaoh places the Israelites under a backbreaking and soul-crushing yoke, whereas God invites them to stand tall. Subtly the Torah indicates that to serve God and to stand upright are not mutually contradictory. On the contrary one cannot really serve God without a robust sense of one's own dignity. True divine service depends on those who serve standing tall.

In conjunction... The book of Ezekiel describes an extraordinary scene. The prophet beholds the Presence of God, and overcome by awe, he throws himself down on his face (Ezek. 1:28). What happens next is stunning. God says, *"Son of man, stand up on your feet that I may speak to you."* God does not tell Ezekiel of the task he is being given until after God instructs him to stand on his own two feet... Then, and only then, when Ezekiel is standing, does God give him his mission... Tempting as it might be—natural as it might be—to be overwhelmed by the encounter with God, the prophet cannot be God's emissary unless and until he can stand on his feet.

God refers to Ezekiel as *"son of man"* (*ben adam*), a term that reminds him of his mortality, and of the fact that he is *"not a god but a man"*... Yet one of the wonderful paradoxes at the heart of biblical theology is that for all our lowliness, human beings are nevertheless summoned to do God's work.

The initial encounter between God and Ezekiel captures something essential about Jewish theology and spirituality more broadly. Who are we to stand in the presence of God? ...Leviticus describes the whole people experiencing something similar. Witnessing a divine fire consuming a sacrifice placed upon the altar, *"all the people saw, and shouted, and fell to their faces."* (9:24).

But lying on our faces in awe cannot be the whole story. Like Ezekiel, we are asked to stand up because if we fail to do so we cannot act in the world and cannot embrace the full dignity implied by living in covenant with God. Since God wants something from us—to keep God's commandments and to help turn the world into a place where God can dwell²¹³—God wants and

needs us to stand tall....No longer exploited laborers, we are now called to be dignified covenantal partners. What God wants from us is not servility but service.

The requirements to stand tall, rather than (only) to lie down on our faces, is crucial for understanding the audacity of biblical faith... As Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it, “in conventional, flat monarchical monotheism, obedience may be taken as an unquestioning, consistent, submissive conformity to God’s mandate. But not so in Israel, because [God] is not known in Israel to be an unengaged, demanding monarch. Rather [God], even as judge and king, is a dialogical, covenant-keeping partner in the life of Israel.”²¹⁴

If throwing ourselves on the ground is at times appropriate and necessary, so crucially, is standing erect. “*Stand up,*” God effectively tells the prophet—and, by extension, the rest of us—“I’m talking to you.”... We are not, by any stretch, God’s coequals. But nor are we God’s slaves. As God’s servants and covenant partners, we are called upon to stand tall.

SOD—The SELF of the UNIVERSE... God’s “I am” has the psycho-theological force not of dissolving individual selves but of reminding us that we were never individual selves in the first place... Our selfhood endures by virtue of its participation in some greater Self,

Rabbi EUGENE BOROWITZ...

In contrast to contemporary privatistic notions of selfhood, the Jewish self, responding to God in Covenant, acknowledges its essential historicity and sociality. One did not begin the Covenant and one remains its conduit only as part of an ongoing people of Israel... The covenanted self knows that Jewish existence must be structured, yet so long as we honor each Jew’s selfhood, this need for communal forms cannot lead back to Law as a required, corporately determined regimen. Instead, we must think in terms of... a dialectical autonomy, a life of freedom-exercised-in-Covenant...

When we live in Covenantal closeness with God—asked only to be God’s helpmeet, not God’s equal—we acquire unique dignity and power, and can hope to remain whole even when burdened by the world’s injustices and our own heavy sins.... Pledged to live most intensively with God, this people must always stand under special scrutiny even as it also deserves our special love.

[Renewing the Covenant: A Theology for the Postmodern Jew, EBB, pgs 288-289]