

Parashah Ninety-Six

Leviticus 26:3–27:34; Jeremiah 16:19–21; Luke 9:57–62

notes by Tim Hegg

The Covenant & God's Faithfulness

As we come to this last *parashah* of *V'Yikra* (Leviticus), the main theme is that of covenant faithfulness, concluding with laws regarding vows. This is a fitting conclusion to a book that has constantly kept the theme of “holiness” before us. To be “holy” (קָדוֹשׁ) means to be set apart, and for God’s people this means set apart to Him by being members of the covenant with Him. Thus, to be holy (in one sense) is to be keepers of the covenant that HaShem has made. Those things which God has given us as the *mitzvot* of the covenant are to remind us of the relationship we have with HaShem and help us maintain our faithfulness to the covenant. As many of the *berachot* begin, “...who sanctifies us in His commandment.” God has graciously given us the means by which we may be constantly set apart to Him, and from the world. One of these means are His commandments. Note that the last *parashah* ends with the admonition of the Sabbaths (weekly and *mo'edim*)—prime examples of the *mitzvot* given to us by God in order to aid us in being set apart to Him.

Perhaps one of the most obvious, over arching lessons in the first half of our *parashah* is that God remains faithful to the covenant because of Who He is—His essential character. Reiterating the words of the Shema initially (obedience on Israel’s part will secure rain and produce in the fields, etc.) and continuing in typical covenant language to delineate both the blessings and the curses, chapter 26 graphically outlines the consequences of Israel’s obedience or disobedience to God as covenant members. Obedience will be met with subsequent blessing while disobedience will inevitably bring God’s hand of punishment—in some cases severe punishment. But what we are most encouraged by is the manner in which chapter 26 ends: (vv. 44f) “But despite all this, while they will be in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, nor will I so abhor them as to destroy them, breaking My covenant with them; for I am Adonai their God.” God’s faithfulness to the covenant is a matter of who He is (כִּי אֲנִי יְהוָה, “because I am Adonai”). He cannot deny His covenant with Israel because He cannot deny Himself. This is no doubt what Paul has in mind when he writes (2Tim 2:11-13): “It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him; If we endure, we shall also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself.” Here we have the duality which, at first glance, seems contradictory. In our text, 26:15, the covenant is able to be annulled or broken: “if, instead, you reject My statutes, and if your soul abhors My ordinances so as not to carry out all My commandments, and so break My covenant, I, in turn, will do this to you....” Paul writes similarly: “if we deny Him, He also will deny us.” It sounds contradictory: if the covenant is established by God on the basis of His own person, how can the covenant be broken or annulled by the disobedience of covenant members? And how can the covenant be broken through disobedience (Lev 26:15) yet maintained by God through His faithfulness (Lev 26:44)?

The answer has to do with the two-fold perspective of the covenant: both individual and corporate. God’s covenant with Israel, whether considered as the Abrahamic alone or the combination of Abrahamic/Mosaic/Davidic, has both an individual as well as a corporate significance. As touching any individual or single generation, the blessings of the covenant come only when there is genuine obedience. But in terms of the overall nature of the covenant, and when viewing Israel as an eternal people, the covenant is secure by means of God’s own word. Confusing this truth has often led to bad theology throughout the Christian era, in which “replacement theology” has taken that which pertains to the individual or specific generation and applied it to the eternal people of Israel. Conversely, Israel has herself misapplied this truth by presuming that God would not punish the individual because of the covenant promises made on a national level.

The blessings of the covenant, enumerated in the first 13 verses of chapter 26, are a treasure indeed! Note them: (1) provide rain, (2) provide food, (3) give peace, (4) protect from wild animals, (5) protect from enemy armies, (6) victory in battle, (7) multiply population, (8) God’s sanctuary

is placed among the people, (9) God's Spirit would not reject the people, (10) HaShem would walk among the people, meaning He would make His presence known.

Ultimately, this list of blessings is summed up in the covenant phrase "I will be God to you and you will be My people." Nothing could be a greater blessing than to have God in our midst! Here is the return to *Gan Eden* where man and God walked together and communed as genuine friends. This is the goal of the covenant, that we should be friends with the Almighty.

But the discipline of HaShem upon those who are His own possession can be severe, especially when rebellion becomes the pattern of their lives. There is a constant refrain of "sevenfold punishment" (26:18, 21, 24, 28). Some have taken this to mean that the punishment will be increased seven times for the same sin. But one wonders whether or not this fits the character of God's justice. Does not a righteous judge mete out measure for measure? Is it righteous to increase the penalty seven times? Would justice be served to give seven punishments for a single sin? Some would respond (and perhaps rightly) that continuing rebellion warrants an increased penalty, much like a repeat offender receives increasingly severe punishment from the courts.

The Sages, however, took this "sevenfold" another way, teaching that God will bring seven different kinds of punishment. The Stone Chumash translates the phrase "I will punish you further, seven ways for your sins." Note the sins listed in vv 14-15:

- 1 not listening to HaShem
- 2 not performing the mitzvot (occasional lapses of obedience)
- 3 considering the decrees loathsome
- 4 rejecting the ordinances
- 5 not performing the mitzvot (a pattern of life)
- 6 annulling the covenant, and thus
- 7 [implied] denying the existence of God

These will be punished seven ways:

- 1 vv. 16-17 - defeat before enemies
- 2 vv. 18-20 - no success in work
- 3 vv. 21-22 - calamity in everyday life
- 4 vv. 23-26 - exile, defeat in battle
- 5 vv. 27-31 - utter despair; death
- 6 vv. 34-35 - complete exile into foreign land, land overrun
- 7 vv. 36-39 - generational loss; survivors weakened

Thus, God promises that, as a true Father, He will discipline those whom He loves, not allowing them to walk their own way or despise the covenant of which they are a part. But the greatness of our God is seen in His faithfulness, and His willingness to forgive. Even though Israel sins and in her sin despises the covenant, God is still committed to bringing her back in repentance and restoring her to the eternal covenant He has made. He will gather them from every direction and return them to the Land (so our *Haftarah* portion indicates). Here, once again, *teshuvah*, returning/repentance, is something initiated by God. Repentance is not pulling one's self up by the boot straps, but responding to the gracious work of God Who seeks the wayward sheep.

It is also to be noted that Israel, while in the lands of her enemies as a result of God's discipline, is still able to prove her repentance through obedience to the Torah. But how would Israel be able to obey the Torah while in the land of her enemies? There would be no Temple, no functioning priesthood, and living outside of the Land would make other commandments impossible to obey. The answer seems obvious: when dispersed Israel would obey the commandments available to her, God would count this as true obedience, and a mark of true repentance. The ability to obey all of the commandments is not a necessity to demonstrate true obedience to the commandments that are able to be obeyed. We find ourselves in the same situation, and God calls us to obey all that we can.

In so doing, we demonstrate a heart to obey God completely, and God looks on the heart, even if man looks on the outward appearance.

Our *parashah* ends, as does the book, with laws regarding vows, and particularly the vow of *korban*, or dedicating something to the Temple for its use. The laws are varied and somewhat involved, but what are we to learn from the fact that the text ends this way? Most obvious is that our vows to HaShem do, in many ways, bespeak the reality of our hearts toward Him. This being the case, we should be diligent to keep our vows, and to be careful in making them. In one sense, the doing of even the smallest *mitzvah* is a fulfilment of a vow, for we have committed ourselves before the Lord to walk in His ways and to do what He commands. But at the level of the smallest *mitzvah* we learn a most valuable lesson, one which applies to all acts of obedience, namely, that apart from His grace in giving us life and strength, not only would we be unable to obey Him, but we would not even have the heart to do so. Did you note carefully that one of the covenant blessings listed in our *parashah* was the presence of the Ruach, the Spirit of God, and His promise not to reject us? The presence of God in our midst, His walking amongst us, strengthens us to desire His ways and to do them. This divine “circle” means, in the end, that we are always and ultimately dependant upon Him for all things, including a heart to love Him.