

Bechukosai

Blessings, Study, Chukeem, and Understanding

In the *Torah* portion *Bechukosai* we learn how blessings will come upon the Jewish people if we observe the *Torah*, and curses will come upon us if we do not observe the *Torah*. Notice that the text is in the plural because this only refers to the Jewish people as a people. Why good or other things happen to individuals is not the subject of this *Torah* portion because we do not know. We do not know why bad things happen to good people. We cannot make any predictions about individuals. In fact, we know that bad things are going to happen to all of us. After all, we are all going to die. We are all going to get sick. Therefore, we cannot make any predictions from this *Torah* portion as to what will be the condition of a person who keeps the laws of the *Torah*. G-d never promised us that we will never have problems if we observe the *Torah*. All He has promised is that He will give us the strength to overcome our problems. This is like modern science where the scientific laws are actually probabilities. For example, according to the second law of thermodynamics, we do not know what the individual atom will do, although we do know that, statistically, this law is going to hold. And that the overwhelming majority of atoms will act according to it. But the question can be asked, though, why does this *Torah* portion open with the words, "If in My statutes you will walk and My commandments you will observe." Why does it mention *if* you will walk in My statutes? Isn't the important thing observing the commandments?

Rashi answers that question by saying that "in My statutes you will walk means" that we should be occupied with the study of *Torah*. In other words, if you will study *Torah* and you will observe My commandments, G-d then will see to it that good things will happen to you as a people. But why does it say if you will walk in My statutes? We would think that the *Torah* should say, "And if you should walk in My judgments or My testimonies." In Hebrew there are three different categories for G-d's commandments. There are statutes, judgments, and testimonies. The *Mishpoteem* or judgments, refer to those types of laws which every society would agree that you must

have. They are so-called national laws such as don't steal, don't kill, etc., although there are gray areas in these national laws. For example, when it says don't kill, does that mean euthanasia? Does that mean abortion? What exactly does it mean, too, when it says don't steal? Does it mean that a government cannot by zoning make your property valueless? Is that considered stealing? There are many, many more gray areas in these so-called national laws that every society must observe in order to have a functioning society. We might think, then, that it is these laws that we should have to study so we could define all these gray areas. But if not, these laws, then at least we should be studying the testimonies, the *Adus*, which refers to the holidays. For example, on our own we would not necessarily conclude that Shabbos should be every seventh day. Maybe it should be every tenth day, like was decreed during the time of the French Revolution, or every sixth or fifth day. But the *Torah* tells us that *Shabbos* should be every seventh day. The concept of *Shabbos* is very understandable, that it is good to have a day of rest, but after how many days this should occur seems arbitrary. This goes for the rest of the Jewish holidays, too. *Pesach* celebrated freedom, but why does *Pesach* have to be in *Nisan*? Maybe it should be in another month when the plagues first started. We received the *Torah* on *Shavuot* fifty days after *Pesach*, but maybe we should celebrate this holiday after we had a chance to study the *Torah*. The holidays of *Succos*, *Rosh Hashona*, *Yom Kippur*, etc. celebrate important concepts. The need for these holidays which celebrate these different concepts can be readily understood by everyone, but when they occur and how they're celebrated seem to be arbitrary. Perhaps these are the laws, the testimonies, the *Adus* is what we should be studying. But that is not what the *Torah* says. It says that we should study the *Chukeem*, the statutes, the laws of *Kashruth*, many of the laws of *Shabbos*, the laws of family purity, etc. These laws seem truly arbitrary. We could say that because these laws are so arbitrary, we do not have to study them since we really cannot figure out their reasons. These laws are by definition laws that are beyond reason. At first glance, this seems to be a very strong question. But the way we study *Chukeem* is similar

to the way we study the natural sciences. We know that these laws of science are arbitrary. When we learn them, we cannot ask why they are they way they are; we know that they just are. For example, why does the law of gravity decree that things must come down instead of go up? We do not know; we just know that it does. Why is it that water freezes at 32 degrees? We do not know why, just that it does. When we study scientific laws, we don't ask why. We only ask what or how. We cannot change scientific laws when we study them. What we do is try to understand them better so we can adjust to them, so we can work with them. If we want to send a rocket up into space, we cannot violate the laws of physics or gravity. We must understand them to make sure that we put enough propellant in the rocket so that it can overcome the force of gravity. We must understand the laws of propulsion so we can overcome the force of gravity. This is what we do in every scientific endeavor. We cannot change the laws. We just learn how to adjust to them and use them to achieve our goals.

This is the same thing that Rashi is talking about when he says that we must study the *Chukeem* if we are to be blessed. It is important for us to learn the *Chukeem* of Judaism because, although these things, too, seem to be arbitrary, they exist just as the physical laws exist. It is our job to understand them carefully so that we can adjust to them. If we adjust to them and follow them, we will see that they are very beneficial to our lives. For example, the laws of *kashruth*, among other things, teach us about reverence for life. After all, when we eat *kosher*, we are taking an animal life, and the laws teach us that we cannot take an animal life, even though it is not a human life, any way we like. It always teaches us about limits, that we cannot eat anything we want whenever we want. In a family that keeps *kosher*, the children understand right away that they cannot do everything they want, that there are limits even to such basic urges as eating. It teaches them discipline. It teaches them that G-d demands of us all self-control. If we look at all the *Chukeem* carefully, we will see that they are very beneficial to us. For example, the laws of *Neidah*, of family purity, teach us that men and women have different sexual needs. The laws of *Neidah* are meant to bring into harmony the dif-

fering sexual needs and desires of a couple. This applies also to the laws of *Shabbos*. The laws of *Shabbos*, at first glance, may seem to be terribly restrictive, but they make every Jew realize that he or she is a prince or a princess. It gives each of us status and allows us to enjoy our family and realize that spirituality is important. Therefore, the *Chukeem*, which at first glance seem to be completely arbitrary, turn out, when we examine them carefully, to be very beneficial to our lives, even though they are arbitrary and even though it is not in our power to change them.

This is what the *Torah* is talking about here when it says that in My laws you shall walk. The rabbis also ask the question, why does the *Torah* use the word "walk" for "learning"? The word in Hebrew for "walk" also means "to go on." They explain that we must constantly increase our understanding, even of things we can't change, so we can cope with them. If we understand the true nature of things, then we can be prepared for the inevitable conflicts that occur. For example, everyone knows that a wedding is a very happy occasion. The wedding, itself, is usually a very happy occasion because we believe that when the couple gets married, they assume responsibility one for the other, and this is the highest form of self-fulfillment. However, the events leading up to a wedding can be filled with extreme tension. Planning a wedding and putting on a wedding is always a tension-filled experience. First of all, not only do you have the couple involved, but you also have their families. The parents of the couple have a right to consider this marriage to be their graduation from parenthood, and their wishes have to be considered. Besides, love itself is not just a wonderful experience. It is also an excruciating experience because all sorts of subconscious feelings come to the fore. Many times the engaged will feel that he or she is not really worthy of the other or that his or her parents are trying to steal him or her from her or him. Other times, one of them may feel that their future in-laws are trying to put him or her down all the time or is afraid that he or she is not getting the attention that he or she deserves. Also, many times an engaged person will act in such a way as to assure the result that he or she does not want and will say, "I'll

reject him or her before he or she rejects me.” There are many problems in life and, if we are not aware of these problems, if we do not understand that they exist, we are going to have trouble dealing with them.

We have to have understanding when we deal with problems of life, and that is why it says here, “And in My statutes you will walk.” In other words, we must continue to try to understand the problems of life on a deeper and deeper level. This is actually the purpose of Jewish learning.

The purpose of Jewish learning is not to produce a product. We all know that in secular learning we produce a product. We get a degree. We are taught how to do a certain thing: how to repair a car, how to make drawings, how to try a case in court, how to diagnose certain illnesses. There is a product that comes out of secular education. In Judaism we don't learn to get a product. In Judaism we learn to get understanding, and there is no limit to understanding. Individual learning stresses, above all, understanding. From very simple *Chukeem* we learn a lot about relationships. For example, in our daily *Talmud* class, we just learned that you cannot use a form get. Based on that simple law, we have explored all sorts of relationships in different settings between husband and wife. We have discovered all sorts of relationships between messengers and the court, etc. We have acquired a great deal of understanding because, even though things seemed simple, when you apply them in differing situations, nothing is simple. It all requires a great deal of understanding. In Judaism we learn for understanding because when we strive for understanding, we also grow spiritually. We are not learning to produce a product. We are not learning to produce something that is finished. We are learning to gain greater and greater understanding, and there are no limits to understanding.

Therefore, when the *Torah* says, “In my statutes you shall walk,” it means that when we look at the *Chukeem*, those things which seem to be arbitrary, we should always strive to understand them, to see how they relate to us, and to understand how they better our lives even though we cannot change them. When we study the *Chukeem*,

the statutes, we are not looking for a product. We are looking for understanding. With greater understanding, we will live fuller and better and richer lives.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a young man who was just graduated from college. After he got his diploma, he ran to his parents and said, "Look, world, here I come. I just got my AB," at which point the world looked at him and said, "Sit down, son, now I will teach you the rest of the alphabet." It is not enough to have only practical knowledge. We also must have understanding because if we have understanding, then we will know how to relate to the world better, and we will know how to control all our conflicting drives and aspirations. If we are able to balance these forces correctly, we will be able to lead a happy life, and we will have good relationships. We will be blessed. If we do not, then we will have a terrible life, and we will have bad relationships and be cursed. Let us all hope that we will have good relationships and be blessed so that the *Mashiach* will come quickly to our day. Amen.