

The Covenant of the Written Law

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Behar and Bechukotai are written in the Torah at the end of the book of Vayikra. This is surprising, since they were already taught to Moshe when he was on Har Sinai (see Vayikra 25:1, 26:46). An explanation of the Torah's placement of these Parshiyot can be suggested by examining the nature of the two covenants Moshe made with the people of Israel on Har Sinai (Shmot 24).

The first covenant Moshe made on Har Sinai was the Oral Law Covenant. The goal of this covenant was for Israel to accept the binding authority of the Oral Law. The Oral Law dictates the way one should practice the mitzvot. To demonstrate the Oral Law's authority regarding mitzvot, Moshe (orally) recited the mitzvot of the Ten Commandments and Parashat Mishpatim to the people. Fittingly, the people accepted the authority of the Oral Law to instruct Israel how to observe the mitzvot with the phrase "We will do!" (Shmot 24:3). The second covenant Moshe made on Har Sinai was the Written Law Covenant. The goal of this covenant was for the people to recognize the vital role the Written Law has for the nation's wellbeing. The Written Law, in addition of being the source of the mitzvot, reveals that Israel was chosen to teach the world about God and goodness. To demonstrate these aspects of the Written Law to the people, Moshe wrote down and read to them a sample of the Written Law from the "Book of the Covenant" (Shmot 24:7). The contents of this book were the Parshiyot Behar and Bechukotai.

Behar and Bechukotai were chosen to show the significance of the Written Law to the people. The laws of Behar, even more than having practical applications, serve to inspire mankind through the promotion of equality (Shmita), social justice (Yovel), and kindness (redeeming the poor from poverty and slavery). Parshat Bechukotai graphically shows the great responsibility the people of Israel have to keep Hashem's mitzvot. In addition, it concludes with the uplifting promise that Hashem will never forget his "covenant" (Vayikra 26:42-45), a word repeated seven times in this Parsha (Vayikra 26:9,15,42,44,45).

Fittingly, the people of Israel agreed to accept the Written Law with the words "We will do (*na'aseh*) and we will listen (*nishma*)", demonstrating that they accepted the conditions of the covenant, as written in Bechukotai: "If you follow My laws and faithfully observe (*va'asitem*) My commandments...I will maintain my covenant with you...But if you do not obey (*tishme'u*) Me and do not heed (*ta'asu*) all these commandments...to break my covenant...I in turn will do this to you..." (Vayikra 26:3, 9, 14-16).

The Torah transferred Behar and Bechukotai from Har Sinai to a different position in order to publicize the covenant. The new location of these Parshiyot is in the center of the four books of the Torah that contain mitzvot. Now, the words of Hashem through which Israel accepted the covenant stand proudly in the heart of the Written Law.

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