

B'chukkotai

בְּחֻקֹּתַי

“By my regulations”

Leviticus 26:3 – 27:34

Torah Together



This last section of Leviticus contains the prophetic list of blessings for obedience to the *Torah* and curses for disobedience. With the fullness of history as a backdrop, it's clear that God knew exactly what the future held for His people. Finally, the last chapter of Leviticus deals with the redemption of things dedicated to God.

1. Reward for Obedience - 26:3-13

a) Treaties or covenants of this time period always contained a listing of rewards (or blessings) and punishments (or curses), usually listing rewards first. What did the Israelites have to do to get these rewards?

The Israelites had to “follow my decrees and be careful to obey my commands,” (Verse 3).

b) God lists three ways in which the Israelites would be rewarded for obedience. Describe the **physical** or **material rewards** that come from obedience.

God promised rain in its season, abundant crops, all the food they wanted, even more than they could eat. They would have victory over their enemies and would be fruitful and prosperous.

c) Describe the **mental** or **emotional rewards** that come from obedience. Do you think these rewards have the same value today?

God promised that they would live in safety having peace in the land, living without fear while their enemies feared them. Even today, living in peace and safety without fear is a valuable reward, sometimes under-appreciated.

The “**suzerainty treaty**” is a form of ancient middle-eastern literature which contained sections listing the rewards (or blessings) for keeping the treaty and the punishments (or curses) for breaking the treaty. This form is found in much of the *Torah*. In fact, the entire book of Deuteronomy is written as a **suzerainty treaty**.

Scripture Link:
Deuteronomy 28:2-14 contains another listing of the blessings that the Israelites will enjoy if they obey God and follow his commandments. Do you find any significant differences in these two lists?

Individual and National Blessing

While the reward for obedience is stated here for the nation of Israel, it is also true that living a life that is obedient to God's teaching and instruction (his *Torah*) leads to personal blessings as well. Thus when the people of a nation serve God, that nation enjoys the benefits of a better moral and economic climate. The spiritual environment of a nation is a reflection of the spiritual beliefs of its people.

d) Describe the **spiritual rewards** that come from obedience. Do you think this still applies today? If so, who receives this reward?

God would keep his covenant with the Israelites, put his dwelling place among them and not reject them. He would walk with them, He would be their God and they would be his people. Although this blessing was given to the ancient Israelites, there is no reason to believe that it is not still valid today: If the Israelites will follow His decrees and obey His commands, God will still reward them with these rewards. So also with spiritual Israel, those believers in the Messiah who have been grafted into Israel. (Romans 11:11-24)

e) Notice that these rewards have implications both to individual Israelites as well as to the entire nation. Do you think this is still true today? To whom does it apply?

Individuals receive these rewards to a certain extent by obedience to God's commands. However, things like peace and safety in the land can only occur on a national basis. To receive these rewards, the entire nation (or community) must be obedient. There is every reason to believe that this is still valid, both for today's nation of Israel as well as for those who are spiritual Israel.

2. Punishment for Disobedience - 26:14-46

a) The listing of punishments (or curses) is much longer than the rewards. Why do you think that this is so? What did the Israelites have to do to receive these punishments?

More emphasis on punishment may be because people are more likely to obey God's commands if they know the consequences for not obeying. (Also, looking back through history we can see the prophetic nature of these punishments.)

b) Based on your description of the physical rewards of obedience, describe the **physical punishments** for disobedience.

If the Israelites disobeyed God's commands, they would be struck with diseases, have poor harvests which would be eaten by their enemies, they would be overrun by wild animals and their enemies would conquer them, making them undergo terrible starvation under siege conditions. Their land would be laid waste and their cities destroyed. Finally, they would be uprooted from their homes and scattered through the nations.

c) Based on your description of the mental or emotional rewards for obedience, describe the **emotional punishments**. Does any particular description shock you?

The Israelites would live in fear and terror, jumping and fleeing at the slightest noise. Those dispersed would waste away in the lands of their enemies.

d) Compare verses 18, 21, 23, and 27. What ideas are common to these verses? What can you learn from this? According to verse 19, what is God trying to accomplish with these punishments?

Each verse begins with “If you still will not listen to me and accept my correction . . .,” showing God’s willingness to forgive their sins. Also each verse states that God will punish the Israelites 7 times over for their sins. He wants to “break down their stubborn pride,” (verse 19).

e) Carefully read verses 33 - 35. What does God say he will do with the Israelites? When this happened, what was to happen to the land? Why did God say he would do this?

If after all the previous efforts to get them to repent have failed, God will scatter the Israelites among the nations. Eretz Israel will be laid waste and in this way would enjoy its sabbath rests. Thus, God will see that the land gets the sabbaths that it did not get when the Israelites lived in it.

f) Verse 38 describes what will happen to the Israelites that are scattered. Do you think this has happened? If so, when? What are the implications of this?

Verse 38 says, “You will perish (or become lost) among the nations.” This happened at least twice, once when they were conquered by the Assyrians in ~722 bc and again when the Romans dispersed them in ~70 ad. There are many “Israelites” living in the nations today who have lost their heritage.

g) According to verses 40 - 45, does God break his covenant with the Israelites? What must the Israelites do to restore the covenant? What does God “remember”?

God will not break his covenant with Israel but will remember his promise to Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham and the land. The Israelites must confess their sins and the sins of their fathers and humble themselves before God with circumcised hearts.

To Perish

While God is explaining what troubles will befall the Israelites if they disobey his *Torah*, **Leviticus 26:38** is prophetic in nature. God states, “You will perish among the nations; the land of your enemies will devour you.” The word “perish” comes from the Hebrew root *abad* which means “to lose oneself” or “to become lost.” This is exactly what happened to the northern kingdom of Israel when they were completely conquered by the Assyrians in about 722 bc. The Israelites were removed from their land, dispersed to the far reaches of the Assyrian empire and “became lost among the nations.” (See **2 Kings 17:7-23**)

Heart Circumcision?

Many people believe the concept of “circumcision of the heart” is a New Covenant teaching, but it is quite clear in **Leviticus 26:40-45** what God means by this term. The purpose of God’s punishment for disobedience is that the Israelites would have a “change of heart” and would **turn (repent, teshuvah** in Hebrew) from their evil ways and return to God’s ways, the *Torah*. So to have circumcised hearts means to have soft hearts, to be willing to humble themselves before God, to confess their sins and to renew their covenant with Him.

Special Vows

This last chapter deals with a **special vow of dedication** (*yafli neder* in Hebrew) that a person might make, usually in response to a blessing. Essentially, it is a **voluntary offering made to God out of a heart of gratitude**. This term first appears in **Genesis 28:20** when Jacob made such a vow to God after he left home to go to Haran. God takes our promises to him quite seriously and expects us to fulfill them. This is not always possible, however, and God has provided a way to meet our commitment to him by “redeeming” the object of the vow. This might happen for at least two reasons. It may be the case that the item that the offerer has promised to God is no longer in his possession. It may also be that the Levites do not have a need for such an item. In cases such as these, the redemption valuation (*arakhin* in Hebrew) is set by the priest, and if paid by the offerer, fulfills his vow to God. However, in certain specific cases redemption is not permitted.

3. Redeeming What is God's - 27:1-34

a) This last chapter of **Leviticus** deals with *arakhin*, sometimes translated ‘valuations.’ It concerns vows and freewill offerings made to the priests or to the tabernacle. Verses 1-8 address the practice of dedicating a person for use by God. What was the value placed on individuals donated in this way? Why was this valuation necessary? Does this practice seem unusual to you? What was the effect of this practice?

Depending on their age and gender, the service of a person was valued at between 3 and 50 shekels. The concept was that a person was dedicated for use by the priests in the work of the tabernacle (or temple). Typically, however, the actual service was exchanged for a specific sum of money which went into the treasury for use by the priests.

b) Verses 9 through 13 deal with giving animals to the priests or to the tabernacle service. What two types of animals could be given? What happened in both cases? Does this seem appropriate to you?

Animals vowed or dedicated to God were either clean (acceptable as an offering) or unclean. A clean animal became holy to God and could not be redeemed. An unclean animal could be redeemed for an amount of money set by the priest plus an additional 20%. In both cases, something of value was given to the priests for use in the service of the tabernacle (or temple).

c) What were the rules if a person dedicated his house to God?
If a man dedicated his house to God, the priest set its value and the man had to pay that value plus 20% to redeem it.

d) What rules applied if a person dedicated part of his family's land to God? What rules applied if he dedicated land that was not part of his family inheritance?

The value of inherited land was determined by the amount of barley seed required for its crop, 50 shekels per homer of barley seed. This value was adjusted based on how many years remained until Yovel. A person could redeem the land by paying the value plus 20%. If the land was unredeemed by the next Yovel, it became the property of the priests. Land dedicated that was not part of ones inheritance was also redeemable but at Yovel, it went back to the original owner.

e) Why was it not possible to dedicate the firstborn of an animal to God?

The firstborn of animals or people could not be dedicated to God because they were already his.

f) Verses 28 and 29 use the term *cherem*, something devoted or committed to God. When one gave something to God (through the priests), was it redeemable? What do you think verse 29 means? What connects it to verse 28?

Cherem implies that the item itself was given to God, not just its value. Once given, the item could not be redeemed. A person given to God for destruction was one who had been convicted of a sin punishable by death.

g) According to verses 30-33, what composes the tithe? To whom does it belong? Why do you think someone might want to redeem a part of his tithe?

The tithe is a tenth of the produce from the land and every tenth animal. It belongs to God. In some cases, both the person and the priests might be better served if the priests received money instead of the produce itself.

Dedicating or Devoting Something to God

Generally, an item was "dedicated" (*kadash* in Hebrew) to YHWH as a free will offering, usually as an expression of gratitude for a blessing. In general, God takes vows very seriously and if one makes a vow to God, He expects it to be fulfilled. However, in keeping with God's benevolence, He decided that in some cases, items dedicated to Him could be redeemed. (This might be helpful if the item dedicated is of limited use to the priesthood.) Such items could be redeemed by the giver or another.

The act of "devoting" (*cherem* in Hebrew) something to YHWH is much different. This act was not voluntary and the item could not be redeemed – the item belonged to God (the priests) indefinitely. Sometimes, the item devoted to YHWH was devoted for destruction, as in the case of a person found guilty of a capital offense.

"These are the commands YHWH gave Moses on Mount Sinai for the Israelites."

Leviticus 27:34

Digging deeper

1. Read **I Samuel 1**. Does your study of **Leviticus 27** shed any light on Hannah's actions? Do you think she was obligated to leave her son with Eli, the priest, at Shiloh?

If Hannah had dedicated her as yet unborn son to the service of the tabernacle, then theoretically she had the right to redeem him (arakah). She either chose not to redeem him or she had made a more specific vow (cherem) to God completely committing (or devoting) her son to his service.

God's Character and the Book of Leviticus

For some people, an in-depth study of the book of **Leviticus** leads to more questions than answers. Many of the practices described seem strange and archaic to our modern eyes. However, if we remember that these are God's teachings and instructions for us, then it is up to us (with His help) to understand them. If we follow the Hebrew tradition of cyclical *Torah* study, we know that we will return to study this book again in about a year. Next year's study may provide additional insight and help to clarify some confusion. And so it goes: each year, as we revisit the *Torah*, we gain further insight into God's character and a better understanding of how He wants us to lead our lives.

1. This completes our study of the book of **Leviticus**. While it may seem that much in this book might not be applicable to our lives today, there are still many profound truths about God and our relationship to him that can be found in these pages. How many can you list?

There are many things that could be mentioned here. For example:

- 1. The graphic instructions regarding the animal sacrifices remind us of the serious nature of our sin – and the value of Yeshua's sacrifice for us.*
- 2. The fact that the penalty for our sin must be paid is a key aspect of God's perfect justice.*
- 3. The idea that God views an offering made by fire as "a pleasing aroma" indicates the value that He places on our obedience.*
- 4. The need for maintaining a ceremonially clean state before we can "draw near" emphasizes the holy nature of God.*

Clearly, many other observations are possible.

For further study, see

Haftarah : Jeremiah 46:13-28

Brit Hadashah : Luke 2:22-24; John 19:31-37; Acts 13:16-17;
Revelation 8:6 – 9:12; 16:1-21