

A Muse: B'chukotai

“If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them; then I will provide your rains in their time, and the land will give its produce and the tree of the field will give its fruit. Your threshing will last until the vintage, and the vintage will last until the sowing; you will eat your bread to satiety and you will dwell securely in the land. I will provide peace in the land, and you will lie down with none to frighten you; I will cause wild beasts to withdraw from the land, and a sword will not cross your land.” (Leviticus 26:3-6)

This week's portion (as well as Ki Tavo) is also referred to as the “tochecha,” because of the strong language of rebuke and ominous warning. If the Hebrews do not obey God's laws. Oddly enough as I was reviewing the parsha I couldn't help but reflect on our history and try to recall when it was, that we actually followed God's laws and observed his commandments. From our very beginning, even after having received the Law, we were not obedient. Throughout the period of the judges and during the kingships we were idolatrous and intermarried with the other cultures surrounding Israel. Later during the second commonwealth there was little recognition of the law among many of our kings, not to mention the corruption of the Temple priests.

Pondering the unique nature and quality of this parsha we ought to ask ourselves what would have happened if the text hadn't read “If you follow My decrees”, but rather “If you follow **our** decrees and observe **our** commandments...” Since the Law was given for the benefit of our society it would have made sense to relate to us as His partners, as we are, according to the midrash, regarding tikkun olam. In other words had we been co-opted into the process of designing and understanding the law rather than being forced to accepting it by fiat, our behavior and consequently our history might have been different. We might have better understood and appreciated the wisdom behind the law and thus the need to adhere without the threat of a Damocles' sword hanging over our collective head.

There is also a need here to define what is meant by “decrees” and “commandments”. Is the text referring here only to the biblical law or does it also include the oral tradition as well as later rabbinic law? Rabbinic Judaism would argue that it includes all the body of law from the written to the oral and rabbinic interpretation. And perhaps there is some

wisdom in this because by taking such a position we are not passive but become active participants in the interpretation of the Law.