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בס"ד

Parashat Re'eh Part I Between the Sections of *Misvot* and *Huqim*

After he completes a thorough expounding of the *misvot* – the first section of laws attached to the Decalogue – Moses “interrupts” his presentation to briefly inform the Israelites about blessings and curses. He emphasizes that the laws he is placing before them will bring blessings or curses (בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה), the first attestation of this locution in the Torah), dependent on compliance or noncompliance, and prescribes a full-blown ceremony of their proclamation upon entering the promised land. In the suzerain-vassal covenant protocol of the time, which the Torah basically adopted with certain modifications, a declaration of blessings and curses was an important feature but it invariably came upon completion of all the stipulations. And when he concludes his presentation of all the stipulations Moses does bring the subject up again and in a major way, providing the content of the declaration and the many attendant details of a dramatic recital (Deut. 27-28). That later pericope is *the* Deuteronomy statement of blessings and curses.

Nevertheless, Moses chose to refer to the blessings and curses at this juncture, something he does not do at any other point in the midst of his law presentation. His intention seems to have been to highlight the importance of the segment of law that had just been concluded. The *misvot* comprised the laws that govern the Israelites’ relationship with G-d and which prescribed the appropriate attitude toward the covenant, essentially expounding the first and second commandments. He was thus acknowledging the *misvot* section as equivalent to being a law code on its own, a compendium that warrants a statement of blessings and curses.* The covenants of other nations did not contain such a focused section of law in the midst of their stipulations to justify such a preliminary statement regarding blessings and curses.

Accordingly, in both the obedience and disobedience clauses of our verses (11:27-28), Moses mentions only the *misvot* segment of law.

Moses explains that upon entering the promised land the nation was to perform a national public recital of blessings and curses at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal (Deut. 11:26-30). Why was this final detail of covenant reaffirmation postponed to the future (albeit the near future)? The answer seems to be that since circumstances were to soon undergo a radical change – what with Moses passing away and the nation in its land – it was important to connect the people in their new situation with the present commitment to covenantal renewal.

The two mountains that were selected for the proclamation of blessings and curses possess remarkable features that suited them for the purpose. They are located in central Israel and face each other, Gerizim to the south and `Ebal to the north. Their peaks are slightly more than two miles apart but at some points at their base they are separated by less than a third of a mile. They are a contrast in fecundity; Gerizim possesses fertile soil and is covered with vegetation, indicating blessing, while Ebal is arid, a feature that served as a symbol of being cursed.

Some scholars consider the fact that Gerizim was to the south also symbolic of blessing. In the ancient Near East directions were determined in relation to one’s position when facing the sun. (Thus, *mizrah* [east] is derived from the root that means “to shine” and refers to the sun’s rising.) When facing the sun from these mountains Gerizim would be to the right, a notion that invokes the symbolism of the right being the superior side and hence selected for blessing.

It surely was significant that the city of Shechem (adjacent to the modern Nablus), a most prominent site from prebiblical times through the biblical period, lies between these mountains. Shechem was situated at an intersection of the north-south and east-west roads and controlled an important trade route as well as choice fertile land to its east. It was respected as the leading metropolis of the region. In addition, it

possessed a great deal of symbolism for the Israelites. It is the location of Abraham's first stop in Canaan, where G-d appeared to him promising his descendants the land and where he built his first altar (Gen. 12:6-7). Jacob purchased land there and also established his first altar there (33:19-20). It was the site of the Dinah episode (Gen. 34), where G-d subsequently appeared to Jacob and instructed him to go to Bethel. It was there that Jacob cleansed his household and entourage from all idolatrous accoutrements and prepared them for the forthcoming spiritual experience at Bethel (35:1-4).**

Thus, prescribing the recital of the blessings and curses upon the Israelites' entering the land at Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal appears most suitable to maximize the impact of the ceremony.

The location of the paragraph break (a *setuma*) after the first three verses of our *parasha* is understandable since it separates the reference to blessings and curses in their plain sense from using those words as the heading of the recitation ceremony. However, the absence of a paragraph break after the two-verse description of the future ceremony of blessings and curses is difficult to interpret, although the following may be said.

After the two verses concerning the future ceremony is a three-verse introduction to the remainder of the stipulations, those sections that are now termed the *huqim and mishpatim* (Deut. 11:31–12:1). (The *misvot*, *huqim* and *mishpatim* combination does not now appear since the first section had been concluded; the combination of these three categories will only reappear after the third section is concluded, as explained in our study on *Parashat Va'ethanan Part I*.) Accordingly, the *ki* that opens verse 11:31, כִּי אֲתָם עֵבְרִים אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן ("When you cross the Jordan"). The last of these verses, "These are the *huqim and mishpatim*" (12:1), formally begins the new section. Those who divided Scripture into the chapters that we are familiar with today indicated this in that they established this verse as the first of chapter 12.

In any event, the three verses 11:31–12:1 constitute a unit that provides the new section with an artistic

beginning in that they embody a chiasmus (A-B-B'A') of five components that touch upon all the significant particulars. In 11:31-32 going forward, we read: A) וְשִׁמְרֵתֶם לַעֲשׂוֹת D) נָתַן C) ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם B) לְרִשְׁתָּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ and E) הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים. In 12:1, continuing forward, it states: E') הַחֻקִּים וְהַמִּשְׁפָּטִים D') לַעֲשׂוֹת C') לְרִשְׁתָּהּ A') ה' אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֶיךָ B) נָתַן.

Endnotes

* In regards to the concept that the *misvot* segment may be thought of as a complete unit of law without mention of the many particulars of the *huqim and mishpatim* (the rituals of religion and the ordinances that govern behavior between man and man, respectively), the following should be noted. Shortly before our chapter Moses had presented a concise summary of G-d's requests from Israel, introducing it with, "And now, Israel, what does Hashem your G-d ask of you, only this..." (10:12), and he proceeds to list a number of fundamentals. The idea is that with a sincere commitment to the basics, fulfillment of the large body of specific obligations that naturally flow from them is assumed to follow. In our *Parashat 'Eqeb Part I* study we cited Micah 6:8 who employs Moses' phraseology to introduce a different formula (with the same objective). This concept of providing a compact formulation of general principles to stand for the whole body of law long ago became a standard practice in the nation, popular in Scripture and in rabbinic literature. A talmudic instance involves Hillel. An individual who desired to convert to Judaism requested a statement of the laws while standing on one foot. Recognizing him to be sincere, Hillel told him, "That which is hateful to you do not to your fellow man, that is the whole Torah, all else is commentary; go and learn" (*b. Shabb. 31a*).

** In later times, Shechem was the site where Joshua renewed the covenant between G-d and Israel (Josh. 24) and where Joseph's bones were buried (Josh. 24:32). Rehoboam, son of King Solomon, went to Shechem, a distance of forty-one miles to the north of Jerusalem, to be crowned king of Israel (1 Kings 12:1) and Jeroboam established the first capital of the northern kingdom there (1 Kings 12:25).