



Engraved Memories • Parshat Bechukotai

Parshat Bechukotai opens with an “if...then...” proposition. If you keep My laws, God says, there will be economic prosperity and physical security. In introducing the “if” side of the equation, the opening verse contains three ways of communicating that we must follow God’s laws: (1) “If you walk in my statutes,” (2) “and keep my commandments,” (3) “and do them” (Lev. 26:3). This is seemingly redundant. If there are no extraneous details in the Torah, why the repetition? Rashi, quoting a midrash, suggests that the first part of the verse, “If you walk in my statutes,” advocates for the laborious study of Torah.

The words in Hebrew for the first phrase, “If you walk in my statutes,” are “*im bechukotai tei’leichu.*” The word *chok* is commonly understood as laws that transcend rational explanation. The first Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liady, suggests that *chok* can also be understood as related to the word *chakak*, to engrave. There is a fundamental difference between writing on parchment and engraving on stone. When inscribing on parchment, the ink never becomes part of the parchment; they remain two distinct entities. Engraving, however, is embedded within the stone. It remains one entity. We need to learn Torah to the point that it becomes ingrained in our being.

In a seminal article about the importance of memory in rabbinic literature, Shlomo Naeh, professor of Talmud at Hebrew University, contends that the Talmudic sages conceptualized

the learning and memorizing of Torah content as a physiological process, whereby the concepts are suffused within the body of the sage. Through reviewing, reciting, and memorizing, the Torah became an embodied part of the learner. This is no mere metaphor. Rava critiques the masses for standing for a *Sefer Torah*, but not a Torah scholar (*Makkot 22b*), because the scholar also has the words of Torah engraved into his body.

Many modern researchers suggest that memory is “engraved,” as it were, in the brain through neural networks. According to the theory of long-term potentiation, when two neurons are activated at the same time, the connection between them strengthens. The more times an idea is reviewed, a stronger neural connection is created, forming more elaborate and durable memories that can be retrieved more quickly. Following this mental model, retaining Torah information can be understood as a literal physiological manifestation of Torah ideas being engraved into our minds.

This concept is not just intellectual, limited to the mind and ideas, but is also essential for character and virtue. As Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm powerfully formulates in his 1965 *drasha*, “The Tablets Within,” the laws and values of the Torah need to become an integrated part of the human being. They need to be “organically bound up with your own soul and heart and mind, integrated into your personality.” No matter what challenges and changes we encounter in life, our relationship and identification with God and Torah is “permanent, unexchangeable, and indelible.”

The statutes are not just meant to be learned, but to be acted out - “If you *walk* in my statutes.” The repetitive performance of the commandments decreed by the divine will creates an embedded habit, influencing our emotions and behavior. As Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests in his explanation of *chukim* in *Parshat Chukat*, “Just as a statute is carved into stone, so a behavioral habit is carved in depth into our unconscious mind and alters our instinctual responses.” This contrasts with the curses enumerated in *Parshat Bechukotai* which are a consequence of walking with God *keri*, occasionally, or irregularly (Lev. 26:21). This sporadic stance is not enough to build the muscle memory and to create the holy habits encouraged by God.

A beautiful midrash expresses this idea by connecting “If you walk in my statutes” to a verse

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in Psalms, “I consider my ways, and I direct my feet to Your precepts” (Psalms 119:59). “David said,” according to this midrash, “‘Master of the universe, each and every day, I would calculate and say: I am going to this place and that residence, but my legs would take me to synagogues and study halls.’ That is what is written: ‘And I direct my feet to your precepts.’” Through consistent repetition, King David created a habit so entrenched in his body, that his feet instinctively led him to spiritual pursuits.

Flourishing comes when we personify Torah ideas and behaviors. Through laborious study, the concepts become engraved in our minds. Through repetitive actions, the behaviors become habitual. By following this prescription, may we merit receiving all of God’s blessings and protections.

Character Challenge: Try to memorize a Torah concept to which you connect deeply. As you review, envision the neural connections become stronger in your brain, and reflect on how the Torah is becoming engraved into your mind.

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “Hence the brilliant new concept that emerged in rabbinic Judaism: *cherut*, the freedom that comes to a society – of which Jews were called on to be pioneers – where people not only know the law but study it constantly until it is engraved on their hearts as the commandments were once engraved on stone. That is what the Sages meant when they said, “Read not *charut*, engraved, but *cherut*, freedom, for the only person who is truly free is one who occupies himself with Torah study.” In such a society you keep the law because you want to, because having studied the law you understand why it is there. In such a society there is no conflict between law and freedom” (“The Birth of a New Nation,” *Covenant & Conversation*).