

PARSHAT BEHAR- BECHUKOTAI

3 – 9 May 2026
16 – 22 Iyar

Torah Reading: Behar-
Bechukotai: Leviticus 25:1 - 27:34
Haftarah: Jeremiah 16:19 - 17:14

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

ARE MYSTERIES SUPPOSED TO STAY MYSTERIES?

It is well known that some Torah commandments are defined as “rational,” classed as mishpatim, while others are presented as “supra-rational,” called chukim.

Rational laws were issued along with a logical reason or are obvious to any thinking individual. Typical examples are the laws against stealing or murder. Regulations that are regarded as non-rational never come with an explanation, as their reason is known only to the Almighty. The classic example of the latter is the law of the Red Heifer.

One of the great questions of Jewish philosophy is: Should we seek to figure out the reasoning for the non-rational commandments? Is it OK for us to sneak a peek behind the veil that shrouds the commandments and attempt to unravel their mysteries? Maimonides seems to offer mixed messages.

He writes in his great Mishneh Torah legal code: “Even though all the chukim of the Torah are decrees [without any rational explanation], it is appropriate to meditate upon them and provide a reason wherever possible. The Sages of the early generations said that King Solomon understood most of the rationales for all the statutes of the Torah.

Maimonides could not be clearer: The chukim are not essentially illogical; it is only that the reasons have been kept hidden from us. Thus, it is worthy to strive to attribute a reasoning for those commandments.

By contrast, in Eight Chapters (his introduction to Ethics of the Fathers), Maimonides appears to state the exact opposite when offering his analysis of the following passage from the Talmud:

“A person should not say ‘I could not possibly imagine myself committing the sin’; rather, he should say, ‘I could imagine myself committing the sin, but what can I do since my Father in Heaven decreed that I may not.’”

Maimonides explains that this teaching only applies to chukim, commandments that logic does not compel. Regarding these mitzvot, where there is no obvious moral reason (except for the fact that the Torah forbids it), it is right that a person should state that he restrains himself purely out of fealty to the Almighty.

By contrast, with regard to any commandment that is compelled by logic, in no way should a person say, “I could have done that act,” as to any decent person that those acts are patently immoral, and it is natural for a person to

be repulsed by them.

According to Maimonides’ understanding here, then, when it comes to chukim, a person should look to conjecture rational explanations, but should instead view them all as commandments that are complied with purely because that is what “my Father in Heaven decreed.”

So, which one is it? Do I treat chukim as non-rational and comply due to Divine fiat, or do I attempt to figure out their proper explanation? How could it be both?

The Rebbe gives two insights that transform our understanding of this issue. What appears to be an irreconcilable contradiction becomes easily resolved.

The first point is that the rational mishpatim laws are so logical that, as the Talmud says, “if they were never written, they should have by right been written.” In other words, had the Torah never mandated those laws, we would have created them on our own. They are what is known in philosophy as “moral imperatives.” The human mind finds them to be obviously right.

By contrast, chukim are never compelled by logic, even if we can provide a reason that makes sense. Had the Torah not mandated those laws, there is no chance that we would have come up with them ourselves. This is beautifully alluded to by Maimonides himself when he writes, “Most of the Torah’s laws are nothing other than “counsels given from distance” from “He Who is of great counsel to improve one’s character and make one’s conduct upright.”

Chukim will always remain “counsel from afar.” Even if we can secure some understanding of their purpose, they remain something that comes from “afar.” They are the product of a Higher Mind that we may be able to grasp, but are not truly rational notions.

That is why even if chukim can be somewhat understood they are never obviously so. Even if a person strives to understand the chukim, he is still rightly able to say that the main reason for abiding by chukim is because “my Father in Heaven so decided,” not because logic demands it.

The second point is that when it comes to mishpatim both the general law and its specifics are rationally explainable. With regards to chukim, however, the details shall forever remain unexplained. For example, even if we may be able to offer a rationally satisfying reasoning for the Biblical concept of impurity (tum’ah) – not an easy feat, to say the least – we shall utterly fail to explain the reasons for the vast minutiae.

Maimonides comes very close to saying this in his Guide for the Perplexed: “All the Commandments have a rational reason at least insofar as the general principle, and they were commanded for a particular purpose, but the details that were set out for the application of the general rule... for these it is impossible to give any reason at all.”

Maimonides seems to be saying that even when it comes to mishpatim, some details will elude explanation, but with chukim virtually none of the specifics will enjoy a satisfying reason. Thus, even if one were to follow Maimonides’ advice to seek out the reasons for chukim, this is limited only to the main ideas. As for the remainder, we are left saying that this is only due to our obedience to His Will.

So, when it comes to seeking a reason for chukim, we should strive to intellectually grasp whatever we can, as Maimonides says in his Code. But we should also recognize that the reasoning will never be fully compliant with human reason, and we should abandon all attempts to justify the specific sub-laws – as he says in his Eight Chapters.

Here we have the essence of what it is to be a G-d-fearing person:

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to the extent possible we shall try to “know the L-rd” – to use our mind to penetrate as deeply as we can into the meaning of every commandment. We do not say, “As I am willing to comply with all the commandments of faith, why does it matter whether I understand the reasons?”

We were granted the great gift of intelligence so we may use it to the fullest to understand the Almighty’s teachings. And we were also blessed with the great gift of faith which we use to be able to wholeheartedly embrace that which we cannot understand.

Adapted from Likkutei Sichot, vol. 32, Bechukotai II (pg. 174-180)

By Yossi Ives

BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI IN A NUTSHELL

On the mountain of Sinai, G-d communicates to Moses the laws of the Sabbatical year: every seventh year, all work on the land should cease, and its produce becomes free for the taking for all, man and beast.

Seven Sabbatical cycles are followed by a fiftieth year—the Jubilee year, on which work on the land ceases, all indentured servants are set free, and all ancestral estates in the Holy Land that have been sold revert to their original owners. Additional laws governing the sale of lands, and the prohibitions against fraud and usury, are also given.

G-d promises that if the people of Israel will keep His commandments, they will enjoy material prosperity and dwell securely in their homeland. But He also delivers a harsh “rebuke,” warning of the exile, persecution and other evils that will befall them if they abandon their covenant with Him. Nevertheless, “Even when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not cast them away; nor will I ever abhor them, to destroy them and to break My covenant with them; for I am the L-rd their G-d.”

The Parshah concludes with the rules on how to calculate the values of different types of pledges made to G-d, and the mitzvah of tithing produce and livestock.

BEHAR-BECHUKOTAI HAFTORAH IN A NUTSHELL

Jeremiah 16:19-17:14.

The haftorah discusses the punishments that await those who disregard G-d's law, and the blessings that are the lot of those who follow the Creator's wishes. This follows the theme of this week's Torah reading which details at length the blessings and curses.

The prophet Jeremiah rebukes the people of Israel for their idolatrous ways and for not having faith in G-d. He conveys G-d's words of wrath towards those who do not put their trust in Him – foretelling exile as their punishment – and of blessings for those who do.

"Cursed is the man who trusts in man and relies on mortal flesh for his strength, and whose heart turns away from the G-d. He shall be like a lone tree in the desert, and will not see when good comes, and will dwell on parched land in the desert, on salt-sodden soil that is not habitable. Blessed is the man who trusts in the G-d, to whom G-d will be his trust. For he shall be like a tree planted by the water, and which spreads its roots out into a stream, so it will not be affected when heat comes, and its leaves shall be green, and in the year of drought will not be anxious, neither shall it cease from bearing fruit."

The haftorah ends with the following poignant verses: "G-d who is the source of the hopes of Israel, all that forsake You shall be shamed, and they who turn away from me shall be marked out on the earth that they have forsaken G-d, the source of living waters. Heal me, O G-d, then shall I be healed; help me, then I shall be helped, for You are my praise!"

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 16 Iyar, 5786 – 3 May, 2026

The Manna (1313 BCE)

Manna, the "bread from heaven" which sustained the Children of Israel during their 40 years of wandering through the desert, began to fall on the 16th of Iyar of the year 2448 from creation--one month after the Exodus.

Romans Razed Jerusalem Wall (70)

In the year 70 CE (3830 from Creation), Titus and the Roman army laid siege upon Jerusalem, greatly weakening its defenders. On the 16th of Iyar, the Romans razed the middle wall of Jerusalem. The city was later burned, its inhabitants massacred, and the Temple destroyed on the 9th of Av.

"Nuremberg Laws" Passed in Hungary (1939)

The Nazi Nuremberg Laws, depriving Jews the rights citizenship, were passed by the government of Nazi Germany in 1935. In 1939, on the 16th of Iyar, the laws went into effect in Nazi-allied Hungary.

Dachau Liberated (1945)

Dachau was the first Nazi concentration camp and the model for the other concentration camps. During the war, 200,000 Jews were housed in Dachau. More than 30,000 were killed and tens of thousands died due to the conditions and spread of disease in the camp. The camp was freed by the 45th Infantry Division of the U.S. Seventh Army on the 16th of Iyar, 1945. It was the second concentration camp to be liberated following the end of WWII. The U.S. troops forced the citizens of the local community to come to the camp, observe the conditions, and help clean the facilities.

Witold Pilecki Executed (1948)

On this day in 1948 (5708) Witold Pilecki was executed by the Communist Polish government after a show trial where he was found guilty of espionage. A leader of the Polish resistance, he volunteered to be imprisoned in Auschwitz, where he remained from 1940 to 1943. During that time, smuggled out information on the mass killings and other atrocities that the Germans were committing. They were the first comprehensive reports of the Nazi killing machine to reach the West.

Monday, 17 Iyar, 5786 – 4 May, 2026

Roman Garrison Defeated (66)

Following the theft of silver from the Holy Temple in Jerusalem on the 17th of Iyar of the year 3826 from Creation (66 CE), the Jewish defense force attacked and defeated the Roman garrison stationed in Jerusalem.

Passing of "Noda B'Yehudah" (1793)

The 17th of Iyar marks the passing of Rabbi Yechezkel Landau (1713-1793), author of the Talmudic-Halachic work Noda B'Yehuda and Chief Rabbi of Prague. His famous "Letter of Peace" helped to heal the rift between the great sages Rabbi Yaakov Emden and Rabbi Yonasan Eibeshutz, which threatened to irreparably divide the Jewish people.

Tuesday, 18 Iyar, 5786 – 5 May, 2026

IDF Created (1948)

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was created on Lag BaOmer of 1948. The IDF comprises the Israeli army, Israeli air force and Israeli navy. It was formed to defend the existence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state of Israel and combat all forms of terrorism which threaten the daily lives of its inhabitants.