

Reward, punishment and the environment

"If you will follow My decrees and observe My commandments and perform them, then I will provide rains in your time ..." (Vayikra 26:3-4).

THIS week's parashah begins with what appears to be an explanation of conditional love. It lists all the benefits of performing mitzvot (laws) – everything from good weather, long life and abundant harvests through to fertility and security from enemies are promised.

But, and there is always a but ... "If you will not listen to Me and will not perform all of these commandments ... Then I will do the same to you." Panic, disease, famine and oppression are promised. A few sentences are provided for rewards, and a more expansive list of punishments are enunciated.

This harsh representation of the Divine is softened somewhat by a reassurance halfway, through the parashah, that regardless of the actions of Israelites: "Despite all this ... I will not have been revolted by them ... I will remember for them the covenant of the ancients" (Vayikra 26:44-45).

As parents, while we may not reward and punish our own children in such a biblical fashion, there is some familiarity in the narrative. The Children of Israel are just that – children – and our relationship with God, often referred to as Avinu, our father, is quite paternal. How often

Torah topic

בחוקותי חזק

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do we use the phrase "If you ... then I ..." to our own children, not always with predictable effect?

It is interesting that in Bechukotai the first positive outcome of appropriate behaviour is rain.

We live in interesting times, and it is increasingly difficult for those who reject climate change to defend their position. Freak weather events – tsunamis, hurricanes, "monster storms" – that we have witnessed in North America, record floods in the UK and record temperatures in Australia do not come out of nowhere.

As we are reminded in this week's parashah, although God's love is unchanging, the actions of man have consequences. It seems illogical for us to plough millions of tonnes of carbon into our atmosphere without it having some effect. Our era of mass and unbridled production is having an environmental consequence.

The first parashah of the year, Bereshit, puts Man (Adam in Hebrew means, literally, Man) in charge of the Garden of Eden. At the end of the first chapter God lists what he has "given" Man: every tree, plant and living thing is Man's to

care for. The first action of Man was to name the animals, which is one of the first actions that we do as parents for our children.

Adam's behaviour in the Garden of Eden was to break the one rule he was required to follow. Unlike in parashat Bechukotai, no consequences were outlined for transgression prior to the misbehaviour itself. But it did not make much difference. Just as Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, so did the Children of Israel go on to worship idols and transgress the commandments.

One of the many messages for us is that actions have consequences. One may or may not believe in a Divine Being who reacts to the actions of Man. Yet there is little doubt that our ecosystem, whether divinely created, inspired or simply evolved, does itself react to the actions of Man.

Media reports tell us that Australia has the world's highest per capita carbon dioxide emissions from energy use. We may visit Beijing or Shanghai and be shocked by their levels of pollution, but they are just as shocked by us. Bechukotai reminds us that whether we like it or not, there is an environmental order. Whether Divine or otherwise, recent weather events are proving that mismanagement of our precious ecosystem will result in biblical consequences.

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