

Customs and Laws from the Parsha: Bechukosai

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But if you do not listen to Me and do not perform all these commandments... (Leviticus 26:14)

This week's portion contains one of two sections of curses and admonitions, the other being in Ki Tavo. The Gemara explains that the calendar is always arranged so that there are at least two weeks between the reading of the curses and the festivals of Shavuot and Rosh HaShannah (Megillah 31b and Tosafot loc. cit.).

The Gemara relates that both Shavuot and Rosh HaShannah are classed as days of judgement (Rosh HaShannah 16a). Rabbi Yisrael Meir HaKohen (known as 'the Cofetz Chaim', d. 1933) explains that there should be a break between reading the curses and these days of judgement to avoid 'giving a mouth to the accuser who may indict the Jewish people' (Beir Halacha 428:4).

Many reliable sources including Rabbi Avraham Gombiner (known as the 'Magen Avraham' d. 1682) and Rabbi Moshe Isserlis (known as 'the Rema', d. 1572) indicate that merely being called up for this portion is a bad omen for the individual (Magen Avraham 428:8 and Rema on Orach Chaim 53:19).

In the past the question of whom should be called up generated some negative Shul politics with members jostling to ensure that their adversaries were punished by being selected. Consequently, the Rema describes how the warden in some communities would ask for a volunteer for the aliyah, while Rabbi Yosef Shaul Nathansohn (d. 1875) described the custom to simply not call anyone up for this portion (Shoeil u'Meishiv 5:9).

The custom has developed for the person leining (reading the Torah) to receive this aliyah. This means that it is not strictly necessary to call him up in the normal way as he is standing on the bimah (reading platform) already.

In this way we are able to find a practical solution to this difficult question. While it is perhaps not an honour anyone would seek, reminding ourselves that Hashem li v'lo irah - God is with me, I shall not fear helps us to rise above the threat of bad omens and embrace Divine protection.

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