

We have reached the end of Vayikra. Behukotai begins with blessings and curses: blessings if you follow God's laws, curses if you don't. We observe that in terms of parchment space, the curses take up four times as much space as the blessings. That's a lot of curses. Frankly, even the hardest among us recoil at some of the excruciatingly horrific details of some of these curses. They can be difficult to read. Especially the words **וְנָתַתֶּם בְּיַד אוֹיְבֵי** - **and you will be given into the hand of your enemies** (Lev. 26:25) on the same day that we mark eight months of captivity for the hostages. Not easy. It is enough to give us a theological concussion. No wonder the tradition in the synagogue is to read these verses quietly. It's as the tradition recognized that it might be too traumatic for us to read. On the other hand, we might be tempted to read these verses with just an ounce of irony. God has promised that **He is merciful and gracious, long-suffering in anger, abundant in loyalty and faithfulness** (Exod. 33:6) and has forgiven the people after the Golden Calf. Surely we can forgive a reader for thinking that God might have been going over the top here: **We know You are trying to scare us, but we know just how compassionate You are! You are over-doing it here!** Moreover, we can't help but note that these curses undermine their severity by being so cleverly worded.¹ For example, take this couplet about the land going desolate and note the sevenfold repetition of the root ש-ב-ת:

אֲזַ תְּרָצָה הָאָרֶץ	Then shall the land make up
אֶת שְׁבֻתֶיהָ	for its sabbaticals
כָּל יְמֵי הַשְּׁמָה	throughout the time that it is desolate
וְאַתֶּם	and you
בְּאֶרֶץ אוֹיְבֵיכֶם	are in the land of your enemies;
אֲזַ תִּשְׁבֹּת הָאָרֶץ	then shall the land rest
וְהִרְצִית אֶת שְׁבֻתֶיהָ.	and make up for its sabbaticals.
כָּל יְמֵי הַשְּׁמָה	Throughout the time that it is desolate,
תִּשְׁבֹּת	it shall observe the rest
אֶת אֲשֶׁר לֹא שְׁבָתָה	that it did not observe
בְּשְׁבֻתֶיכֶם	in your sabbaticals
בְּשְׁבֻתְכֶם עָלֶיהָ.	while you were dwelling upon it.
	(26:34-35)

Paraphrase: **When you are expelled from the land, because you violated God's laws, (including those pertaining to Sabbaticals!) the land will be empty, and there will be no one to work it! It will be on a permanent Sabbatical! And that will make up for all the Sabbaticals you violated!** Despite the severity of the curse, the repetition of the root

ש-ב-ת seven times (Get it? Seven!) takes away its sting by being so clever. Like many artfully articulated curses, we detect an ironic message here: **I may be trying to curse you, but you'll admire the way I say them!** Nonetheless, whether we read them quietly or ironically, they are harder to read this year because of the trauma Israel has endured, and we, an ocean away, feel so shaken by the vitriolic hatred that has been unleashed against us. Let's focus instead on the blessings. Here are some words of comfort that are familiar to us from the **Prayer for Peace** that we recite every Shabbat:

וְנָתַתִּי שְׁלוֹם בְּאֶרֶץ וּשְׁכֻנָּתָם וְאִין מִחֲרִיד
וְהִשְׁבַּתִּי חַיָּה רָעָה מִן הָאָרֶץ וְחֶרֶב לֹא תִעָבֵר בְּאֶרְצְכֶם.
I will bring peace to the land
and you shall lie down and no one shall terrify you.
I will rid the land of vicious beasts
and it shall not be ravaged by war. (Lev. 26:5-6)

Further down in the list, we find this fascinating verse:

וְהִתְהַלַּכְתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְהָיִיתִי לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים
וְאַתֶּם תִּהְיוּ לִי לְעָם.
I will walk about in your midst,
and I will be a God for you,
and you yourselves
will be a people for me. (26:12)

The image of God **walking in the midst** of the people is striking. It brings to mind what was known as the **"royal walkabouts"** that Queen Elizabeth (z'l) engaged in from time to time.² This was her way of interacting with a large number of ordinary people on a fairly frequent basis. Abraham Lincoln was also very fond of interacting with ordinary people on regular walks. On his stroll through Richmond following its surrender, he is described as "looking about with an interested air and taking in everything."



¹ This is a common feature of Yiddish curses. They may sting badly, but ironically, they do so with such artfulness and wit. To wit, some examples:

May he own a large shop stocked with merchandise: what he has, may no one want; and what they want, may he not have!
May he grow like an onion: with his head in the ground and his feet in the air!
May he amass tremendous wealth, and spend it all on doctors!

May God bless him with all his heart's desires, but he should be crippled in all his limbs and not be able to move his tongue!
May I visit him in celebration, and may he visit me on crutches!

² Her custom began in 1970 on a trip to Australia and New Zealand and continued right up until before her death. Prior to that, British royalty seldom interacted with their subjects.

If we analyze **התהלכות-walking-about**, closely, we note that it appears in many places in the Torah. The first time we see it is in the Garden of Eden: **וַיִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶת קוֹל ה' אֱלֹהִים** **מִתְהַלֵּךְ** **בְּגֵן לְרוֹת הַיּוֹם** **God strolling in the garden** (Gen. 3:8). Hanokh **strolls with** God, (Gen. 5:22, 24), as does Noah (Gen. 6:9) and Abraham (Gen. 17:1). When Jacob is on his deathbed he refers to **The God in whose presence my fathers strolled, Abraham and Isaac...** (Gen. 48:15). In each of those cases, the **individual strolls with** or **in front of** God. But in the blessing that God bestows upon Israel for following His ways, it is inverted: **God will stroll among them** and we note how striking this is, in that it evokes a tremendous sense of intimacy. The use of the word **התהלכתי**-which literally means, **I will take myself and stroll about with you** as opposed to the simpler form, or **והלכתי** which means, **I will walk**, prompts this fascinating comment from our highly favored 18th century Italian scholar, Isaac Samuel Reggio (1784-1855):³

יש הפרש בין הליכה להתהלכות. מי שחפץ ללכת למקום ידוע נקרא הולך כמו ויציגה הלך לדרך (בר' לב:ב) אבל מתהלך אינו מכוון למקום ידוע רק לטיל פעם כה ופעם כה כמו אם יקום והתהלך בחוץ (שמות כא:יט). וכך הוא בהליכת מהשבת הלב מי שפנו לעמד על דבר שחפץ לדעתו נקרא הולך אבל החושב על דבר נחמד ללבו ומתעסק בו מאהבתו את הדבר ההוא נקרא מתהלך וזוהי ההתהלכות את ה' או לפני ה' הנזכרת אצל הצדיקים...

There is a difference between הליכה-walking and התהלכות-taking oneself out for a walkabout. A person who wants to go to a specific destination is a הולך-walker for example, Jacob about whom it is said, he went on his way, (Gen. 32:2).⁴ But the term מתהלך-walkabout does not indicate a specific destination, but rather to here or there one time or another, as indicated in the verse, if he can rise and walk about (Exod. 21:19).⁵ And this is the way the text refers to walking meditatively. One who walks with specific intent is called a הולך-walker but someone who has a pleasant thought and wants to go out because he loves going out is called a מתהלך-a flâneur⁶ and this is the walking-about with God or before God that is spoken of in reference to the righteous (Hanokh, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob)...

וכן כפן בהיות השם אוהב את ישראל ושוכן בתוכם, כל מהשבותיו אליהם, כי מתהלך בתוכם, רואה מעשה כל איש ואיש, וכל מה שהוא רואה יש בו נחת רוח לפניו, זה יושב ומתבונן בתורתו, וזה קוצר שדוהו ומגיש פאה, וזה מגיש ציצית בטליתו, וזה מלנה סלע לעני בשעת דחקו, וכיוצא לאלפים ענינים ומעשים שעולים לרצון לפני כסא כבודו, והיא ההתהלכות כי הוא קרוב אליהם, ומשגיח על הכל:

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In this instance of this phrase, it refers to God loving Israel and dwelling in their midst. All of His thoughts are directed towards them because He walks about in their midst. He sees what everybody does, and everything that He sees gives Him great pleasure. One person is sitting and delving into His Torah. Another is harvesting his field and leaving a corner unharvested (according to the law in Leviticus). Another person is tying tzitzit to their garment. Yet another is lending out money to a poor person in a time of need. And similarly, the thousands of other things that are delightful to God and come to the attention before His holy throne. והיא ההתהלכות This is what walking about means: that He is close to them and is observes everything that they do.⁷

Thus, a picture emerges of a loving God, deeply attentive to the daily activities of His people, who **strolls about** in their midst taking great pleasure in how good they are, how well they treat others, how deeply involved they are in fulfilling the way of life that He has set out for them.

Is there any moment in Jewish life that evokes this idea? What is the closest re-enactment of I-והתהלכתי בתוכם-I will stroll about among you that we can think of?

Consider the weekly Torah service. First, the Ark is opened, and then the Gabbai takes the Torah out and gives it to the Hazzan (or someone else), who then carries it and **strolls in the midst of the congregation** with it, as individuals make symbolic gestures towards it, such as touch it with their tzitzit. While the Torah is obviously not God, it is the symbol of God's revealed word, and contains God's name.

The procession of God's word and God's name in the midst of the congregation is a pre-enactment (!) of a divine התהלכות-walkabout. As a symbolic moment that is intended to invoke the memory of Israel's trek through the desert, the Torah procession also **pre-enacts** God's blessing to Israel, if **Israel follows God's laws and faithfully observes God's commandments**. Note the amazing move that the tradition makes here. Instead of marinating us in a brine of bitter curses, every time we witness the Torah procession, we get a sweet tasting of the wonderful blessings that await us if we follow the Torah. We hope that in that moment of **והתהלכתי בתוכם-strolling in our midst**, God will see all of our goodness and derive great pleasure from us! That would be the greatest blessing!

**שבת שלום! חזק חזק ונתחזק!
Shabbat Shalom! Hazak Hazak Ve-Nithazek!**

**Today is Day 239.
We pray that the hostages will be freed!
May God comfort the families of the fallen
soldiers of the IDF and heal the wounded.**

³ Reggio's Commentary on Gen. 5:22.

⁴ Upon Jacob's return to Canaan after his encounter with Esau.

⁵ A reference to a person who is injured in a quarrel.

⁶ This term originates from French and describes someone who strolls through the city or countryside with the intention of observing and enjoying the surroundings in a leisurely and

contemplative manner. It is likely that Reggio may have been thinking of the Italian word, *passeggiatore*. Like *flâneur*, a *passeggiatore* (or *passeggiatrice*) enjoys the act of strolling and taking in the sights and experiences of their environment.

⁷ Reggio's Commentary on Lev. 26:12.