

Parsha Q's – Acharei Mot (Some material from N.Liebowitz 5722)

Leviticus 18:5

And you (plural) shall observe (ushmartem) my *chukkim* and *mishpatim*, which a person shall do and live by/with/through them (*vochai bahem*); I am G-d (YKVK).

Questions:

- 1) In this context, what are *chukkim* and *mishpatim*?
- 2) What kind of life is meant here, and how does it connect to observance?

1) The popular explanation is that *chukkim* are arational commandments, *mishpatim* rationally accessible commandments. However, the Spanish philosophic tradition denied the existence of rationally inaccessible commandments, and many, many other translations of these words have been offered. Also, each likely has different meanings in different contexts.

That said, our verse occurs in the middle of a Divine speech that begins by ordering the Jews not to imitate the actions of the Egyptians and Canaanites, but by contrast to follow Him. This is followed by a list of sexual prohibitions (possibly excepting verse 21, which is halakhically interpreted as a reference to idolatry rather than intermarriage), with the conclusion stating that violation of these prohibitions caused the Land to vomit out the Canaanites. Assuming that the speech is a literary unity, and the condemnation of Canaanite actions at the beginning and end strongly indicate that it is, it seems most likely that both *chukkim* and *mishpatim* here refer to sexual transgressions. I leave it to you to decide whether the rational/arational axis is useful for encompassing the transgressions listed. (Note also Yechezkel 20, which alludes several times to this verse but lists Shabbat as a category parallel to *chukkim* and *mishpatim*.)

2) The Targumim here translate “live by them” as referring to the life of the World to Come. As the Sifrei notes, observant people do not live forever.

Rashbam and Bekhor Shor both say it refers to temporal life, but that this is not a promise of eternal life but a protection against unnatural death. For Rashbam, that death would be the result of Divine punishment, for Bekhor Shor the consequence of dissolute living. In particular, Bekhor Shor suggests that adulterers tend to have their lives shortened by cuckolded husbands, thus providing a tenuous connection to the sexual theme of the section. (Note also Psalms 119:107 and Ibn Ezra thereupon.)

Netziv suggests that observance enables one to live a full life spiritually rather than temporally.

Ramban suggests that the *peshat* is that the life stems from *mishpatim* alone, which are necessary for an orderly society. Working within the tradition, however, he suggests that life can mean different things for different people. He makes the original suggestion that for some people the life of this world and of the World to Come can be eternally combined – Elijah is the example. Ramban suggests that total disregard for the flesh is necessary for this, perhaps offering yet another tenuous connection to the section's other substantive content.

Note that here the halakhic and aggadic traditions are at odds, however. The Halakhic tradition famously uses this verse to allow or mandate violating the commandments to preserve this-worldly. Note further, however, that the halakhic tradition further argues that this permission/obligation does not apply to many or all of the sexual transgressions listed immediately thereafter.

I welcome suggested interpretations of this verse that take adequate note of context and offer plausible translations of *chukkim* and *mishpatim*.

Shabbat Shalom

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