

Blessings and Curses

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Ki Tavo* (Deut. 26:1 – 29:8)

By Frances Fried

“V'hayah ki-tavo el-ha'aretz asher Adonai Eloheycha notein l'cha....”
“When you have entered the land that Adonai your God is giving you....”

In *Parashat Ki Tavo*, God made his third Covenant (b'rit) with the Jewish People:¹ “You have affirmed this day that Adonai is your God, that you will walk in His ways, that you will observe His laws and commandments, and that you will obey Him. And Adonai has affirmed this day that you are ... His treasured people ... and that He will set you ... high above all the nations ... and that you shall be ... a holy people....” Moses and the Levitical priests then sealed the covenant by proclaiming, “Silence! Hear, O Israel! Today you have become the people of Adonai your God.”²

In the first Covenant — the one that God made with Abraham³ — God guaranteed Abraham many children and various land boundaries, the Covenant of the Jewish Nation. In the second Covenant — the one at Mount Sinai⁴ — God revealed the laws to the Israelite people and granted an eternal agreement and a guarantee that can never be rescinded. In effect with these two Covenants, God has made Israel both a nation and a religion. The third covenant is set to take effect upon the peoples' entry into the Promised Land: “When you have entered the land that Adonai your God is giving you....”⁵

A primary focus of *Parashat Ki Tavo* is the blessings and curses to be proclaimed by the Levitical priests once the Israelites had crossed the Jordan and entered the Promised Land. The *Parashah* describes a ceremony that is to take place on the neighboring mountains of Gerizim and Ebal. The people are to erect a huge stone monument on Mount Ebal, inscribe on it the entire Torah^{6,7}, and bring offerings. Then the tribes of Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin are to assemble on Mount Gerizim to hear the blessings, while the tribes of Dan, Naphtali, Reuben, Gad, Asher and Zebulun are to assemble on Mount Ebal to hear the curses.⁸

¹ The verses of Deuteronomy 26:16-19 verbalize mutual affirmations and acceptances — constituting a binding contract — between God and Israel.

² Deuteronomy 27:9.

³ Genesis 15.

⁴ Exodus 25:1-11.

⁵ Deuteronomy 26:1.

⁶ Deuteronomy 27:2-8.

⁷ Deuteronomy 27:8 stipulates that the words are to be “well clarified” or “well explained.” Rashi interprets this requirement to mean that the words of the Torah were to be inscribed in all seventy primary languages of the time — an amazing achievement — so that they could be understood by all the peoples of the world.

⁸ Deuteronomy 27:11-13.

The Kohanim and the elders of the Levites are to stand in the valley between the two mountains and loudly proclaim the blessings and the curses — blessings for those who observe the commandments, and curses for those who do not. In response, the respective tribes would publicly acknowledge the consequences by shouting, “Amen.”⁹

Twelve curses were to be proclaimed for those on Mount Ebal, and it is assumed that an equal number of blessings were to be proclaimed for those on Mount Gerizim.¹⁰ All of the curses were for transgressions performed secretly or in private by those who appear to be pious, respectable members of society. Both the blessings and the curses were aimed at guiding the hearers to live in accordance with God’s commandments.¹¹ The ceremony, in effect, would be a public declaration that there can be no contradiction between public and private morality.¹²

I like Rabbi Shlomo Riskin’s view of the three Covenants. He says that “If we look at the three Covenants, it appears that the third is more universal and moralistic. The blessings and curses can apply to all human beings,”¹³ not just to the Israelites: “Cursed is the individual ... who scorns his/her parents, trespasses on the boundary of his neighbor, deceives a blind person on the road, perverts the judgment of a stranger, orphan and widow, is involved in sexual immorality, strikes his/her neighbor secretly, takes a bribe to shed innocent blood.”¹⁴ “There are 12 curses and blessings in all, which correspond to the twelve tribes. The first forbids making a graven image of worship ... and the last insisting upon the necessity of upholding these universal laws.”¹⁵

Let us take Israel as an example. Here we have a country that has taken in displaced persons from all over the world, many of them intellectuals, scientists, physicians, speaking different languages, practicing their own rituals. They, too, deal with war and peace, what is right and good, the social inequities of the many different types of people living within their borders. They must face tremendous economic challenges, decreasing water supplies, nuclear proliferation.

⁹ Deuteronomy 27:15-26.

¹⁰ While the 12 curses are explicit, the blessings are not. Scholars presume that the blessings were the reverse of the curses.

¹¹ “Blessings and Curses,” *The Torah – A Modern Commentary*; Edited by W. Gunther Plaut; Union of American Hebrew Congregations; 1981; p. 1518.

¹² *The Chumash: The Stone Edition*; Edited by Rabbis Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz; Mesorah Publications, Ltd.; 1993; p. 1073.

¹³ Commentary on *Parashat Ki Tavo* by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin; Ohr Torah Stone; 2003.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

As a Reform Jew, I feel proud of our accomplishments as Jews throughout the world. By applying the third Covenant as a universal covenant for all people in the universe, trying to better the understanding of all people in the meaning of peace between nations, to live side by side, to live and let live, to share knowledge, to help the disadvantaged and downtrodden wherever they are, by pioneering in stem cell research, using the combined knowledge of the many knowledgeable scientists who have immigrated to Israel, we as a Jewish people using all of these skills for the good of mankind would truly make us a nation or people to be admired.

Discussion:

1. Why do the curses follow the blessings?
2. How are the blessings and curses revealed to each other?
3. Are the blessings and curses opposites, or could they be complementary and polar ends of the same continuum?