

Ki Tavo 28:58-29:8¹

Deuteronomy 26:1–29:8

‘When you enter’ ... ‘When you enter the land that the Eternal your God is giving you as a heritage ...’ so the parsha is about the costs and benefits, rights and responsibilities of entry into Eretz Israel; but it contains what has been described as one of the most powerful and frightening chapters of the Torah. Fourteen verses (Deuteronomy 28:1–14) outline all the good things that will happen to the Israelites once they have entered the promised land if they obey God and faithfully observe all of the divine commandments. That’s “the good news.” Then come 54 verses (28:15–69) of the curses that will befall the people if they do *not* faithfully observe all the commandments. This is the most terrifying litany portraying various kinds of Jewish suffering in our classical literature.

It is custom in Progressive communities to omit all or most of these – today we only read the last 11 verses, which are less graphic than the preceding ones. The non-progressive practice is often to chant the 54 verses quickly and quietly, and no-one really wants to be given the Aliyah for this section, so in the shtetl it was often the ‘town fool’ or ‘simpleton’ who got called-up. Many years ago it was my Barmitzvah portion!

Fortunately the custom in my synagogue at the time – Belsize Square – was to read Maftir and Haftarah; so I only read the very end of the portion – the 8 verses of Chapter 29, and the Haftarah – which I’ll come to in a minute.

At the close of the Torah service we recite from Proverbs that Torah is a ‘tree of life’ and that “Its ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace” (Proverbs 3:17). So why is this portion filled with so much unpleasantness?

For those who believe that Torah is God-given, then the punishments meted out by a merciful God to those who fail to keep kashrut or give charity to the poor seem excessive. For those of us, as Progressive Jews, who view these words as written by men, this is not an issue; but on the other hand we then need to consider the intention of the authors – why include this lengthy, detailed and gruesome list?

There’s the tale of a Scottish priest giving a hellfire and damnation, fire-and-brimstone sermon to his congregation. He details all the terrible punishments that will befall them if they sin. And he preaches that as they are punished they

¹ I have used the excellent discussion of Ki Tavo by Rabbi Marc Sapperstein for some of the material on pages 1-2 - <https://reformjudaism.org/torah-portion/ki-tavo>

will cry out “Lord, Lord, we didna ken” (i.e. we didn’t know); and the priest goes on to warn that the Lord will reply “Well ya’ken the noo”.

So one interpretation of KiTavo is that it is meant as a warning – so we can’t claim that “we didna ken”. But others take issue with this; seeing such a negative and punitive rationale for a religious life as a poor substitute for a positive model of piety and commitment and empathy and holiness.

Another explanation is that this section is the description of the historical experience of the people of Israel in biblical times presented as an object lesson. The people in Judea knew about what had happened to the northern kingdom of Israel — how the Assyrian armies had swept through the Land, destroying city after city and finally the capital city of Samaria, imposing massive deportations of the population and bringing in other peoples to settle the Land, scattering the exiles throughout the Assyrian empire, prohibiting them from maintaining their own religious institutions.

So the intention was for people to see that this disaster was not simply a matter of superior military might and international power politics, but was consistent with God’s will, caused by the religious failings of the Northern Kingdom. The religious failings leading directly to the divinely inspired and disastrous consequences.

In the aftermath of the Shoah, however, the idea that suffering can be understood as divine punishment has rightly come to be regarded as completely illegitimate and deplorable; although it is all too often used by what we can term the theological lunatic fringe – from across the religious spectrum.

So chapter 28 is paradoxical, and one commentator, Rabbi Marc Saperstein concludes ... that he sees ‘no way of salvaging these terrifying 54 verses from Parashat Ki Tavo except as a passage of literary and historical interest. It is part of our Sacred Scripture, a part from which many of us will dissent. Neither this vision of unmitigated horrors nor the depiction of serene enjoyment of the bounty of the Land flowing with milk and honey earlier in the parashah reflects our experience of history, or our understanding of God’s relationship to history.’

Fortunately the Haftarah for this Shabbat – the penultimate one before Rosh Hashanah – is the 6th of the 7 Haftarot of consolation, a sequence which begins on the Shabbat after Tisha B’Av, and which leads up to Rosh Hashanah. These Haftarot are all taken from the later chapters of Isaiah – i.e. the ones we now attribute to the second Isaiah – Deutero-Isaiah – and they are all couched in

terms meant to console those grieving for the events commemorated at Tisha B'Av; leading up to the High Holy Days and the start of a New Year.

In this Haftarah there is a theme of 'light', posed in contrast to the dark times that people might be experiencing. The tone is set in the very first line "Arise, shine, for your light has dawned; the Presence of the Lord has shone upon you!" (60:1).

If this sounds familiar that is because it was adapted for use in Lecha Dodi.

So there is some consolation in having Ki Tavo as one's Barmitzvah portion since there is a reminder every Friday evening, not of the curses but of the proclamation of hope and a bright/light future.

This link with the Torah portion might seem slightly tenuous – why have this powerful proclamation of hope after the 54 curses in chapter 28? Which themselves follow 12 others in chapter 27 which are required to be declared clearly and loudly by the Levites. Followed by the requirement for the other 11 tribes, positioned on two mountains, to proclaim AMEN loudly in response to each of them.

Now I don't pretend that there is some easy solution to the paradox of Ki Tavo. But there is a hint of something different, something more hopeful in chapter 26 – which can be seen as summarizing the nature of the relationship between God and the people of Israel.

Verses 18 states that 'And the Lord has affirmed **or selected** [he-emirkha] this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people who shall observe all His commandments'. But the verse preceding this one states that 'You have affirmed **or selected** [he-emarta] this day that the Lord is your, God, that you will walk in His ways, that you will observe His laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey Him.' (Deuteronomy 26:17)

So God is chosen by the Jews, just as much as the Jews are chosen by God. It is a two-way covenant, and this theme is developed further in the remaining chapters of Deuteronomy, particularly Nitzavim which we will read next Shabbat, the one immediately before Rosh Hashanah; and we will read it again as part of the Yom Kippur Mincha service. It includes the verse 'I have set before you life and death, [the] blessing and [the] curse. [You shall] choose life, so that you and your offspring/descendants will live'.

So here we have choice, hope, responsibility, and fulfilment. At the same time as we have all these dreadful curses. So perhaps any apparent confusion can in part be resolved by focusing on the idea that we have choice, and we are urged to choose based on a good deal of information regarding possible outcomes and consequences.

Non-Jews, and Jews themselves, have often wondered why the Jews were chosen – a confusion summed up in the famous/infamous couplet – often wrongly attributed to Hilaire Belloc²

How odd; Of God; To choose; The Jews

But from Ki Tavo we now have the basis for a clear and succinct response

Not quite; So odd; The Jews; Chose God

So we are not only a/the chosen people, we are also a choosing people – something to bear in mind in the time leading up to the High Holy Days.

Shabbat Shalom

² See Rabbi Jonathan Sacks commentary on Ki Tavo 5777 <http://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-ki-tavo-5777/>