



KI TAVO 5785

Over the years, my wife, Yocheved (Bubie), periodically sends out her thoughts on prayer and the Parsha. She calls them appropriately "Afterthoughts". They are always highly original, ingenious and creative, and quite insightful. I present one of them with my usual edits (with her permission, of course) and additions.

The "Blessing" of the Curse

"May the year end along with all its curses; and let the (new) year begin with all its blessings."

The above is a well-known adage we often hear spoken as Rosh HaShana approaches. I always understood this to mean exactly what it said: Let this year with all its accompanying curses and bad times, be over - enough of that! And let the New Year begin with all its blessings, as if wiping the slate clean. But, in preparing for the Yamim Nora'im, I learned that there is much more behind these words.

This expression is from a piyut called ACHOT K'TANA, which takes the words TICHLEH SHANA V'KILELO-

TEHA from the Talmud in (Megila 31b). The discussion there is about why the Parsha of Ki Tavo, with all its curses (98!), is always read close to the arrival of Rosh HaShana, especially since when Ezra established the practice of reading from the Torah every week, it wasn't done a Parsha at a time. It was done in much smaller units, and it could take more than three years to finish the entire Torah. This meant that there was a special takana to read Ki Tavo at this time, regardless of what part of the Torah they were up to. The opinion of Abayei gives as the reason so that TICHLEH SHANA V'KILELO-TEHA, a statement that clearly refers to the end of one year and the beginning of a new one.

This is not just a lovely thought that we can think about as we begin the New Year. The paytan added the words T'CHAL SHANA UVIRCHO-TEHA at the end, as a plea, which follows upon the words of the Gemara. The true understanding of these words, however, is that these 'curses' are also part of the covenant that we have contracted with HaShem: These are the words of the covenant which HaShem commanded Moshe to forge with the Children of Israel... besides the covenant that He sealed with them in Chorev." (28:69)

A b'rit involves two parties. Each one commits to the other with something.

Gd "committed" Himself to us at Sinai, as elaborated in Parshat B'chukotai (26:15), which also lists the blessings He promised us as well as the curses (L'HAFR'CHEM ET BRITI). Through this b'rit, HaShem revealed His Honor to us for the purpose of our spreading His glory world-wide, a special and sacred mission which was assigned to the Jewish people and realized through our collective and individual behavior through the observance of HaShem's mitzvot. If the Jews do not keep this covenant, it would reflect negatively upon Gd which would result in a Chilul HaShem.

This concept is explained by the Beit HaLevi in his understanding of a verse in B'reishit (46:4). When HaShem said to Ya'akov on his way down to Mitzrayim, I shall descend with you to Egypt and I shall also surely bring you up..." Gd's words were the greatest promise He could ever give us; a pledge that His name would be associated forever with the people of Israel wherever they may be. Any covenant contains the understanding that there are positive consequences for adhering to it as well as negative ones for breaking it - blessings and curses. With our acceptance of the covenant, as finalized in Ki Tavo, we recognized that the K'LALOT would sadly and tragically occur if we broke the covenant.

At the end of the year, a Jew needs to look back and see that all the K'LALOT which occurred during the past year as ALOT HAB'RIT - these terrible maledictions were also part of our covenant. In other words, we need to understand that to fulfill our half of the covenant, we must internalize an acceptance of the K'LALOT as well, painful though they maybe.

As R. Moshe Shapira zt"l, explains (Shuvi V'Nechezeh: Elul - Sukkot, p.194): "Through our attributing of all the curses that fell upon us, all the attacks, all the fears that we had during the year, to that covenant... through that very acceptance, we have demonstrated that we have upheld our part of the covenant and, as in all covenants, we can thus expect to see the fulfillment of the second part of the b'rit - to be deserving of all the blessings that are contained in the covenant as well."

Once having suffered all that happened - and since all this suffering was the K'LALA part of the B'RIT - we have therefore demonstrated that we have been faithful to that B'RIT and consequently now deserve the blessing part of it, the blessing that a New Year should bring us.

Now, I understand the meaning of words I often say in T'hilim, which I never paid much attention to before: All this has befallen us, yet we have

not forgotten You, nor have we been false to Your covenant." (44:18)

We are ready and waiting for those blessings!

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## **Gratitude & the Tochacha (My Own)**

Is there a reason why the Tochacha (the 98 curses) is sandwiched in by the Bikurim (First Fruit) bylaws in the opening of our Parsha and its concluding portion (29:1-8) where Moshe reminds the people of all HaShem did for them during their sojourn in the desert? Rav Soloveitchik has argued that the central theme of the Bikurim ceremony was the profound gratitude the farmer wished to express upon bringing his fruit offering to the Temple. For this very reason, Chazal chose the farmer's declaration (26:5-8) to be the text through which we fulfill the mitzva of retelling the Exodus story at the Pesach Seder.

Likewise, the Talmud (Avoda Zara 5b) comments that Moshe's final words to the people after the Tochacha section were meant as a reprimand, how they failed to show their gratitude to Gd for His constant protective caring and sustenance over the past 40 years.

The connection with the Tochacha should now be clear. There is never -

just never ever - a reason not to say "thank you" for even the smallest of favors. When you acknowledge the kindness that someone does for you - even one as simple as holding a door open - you are, in effect, declaring that that person matters and you do not take him/her for granted. If this is how we are to relate to family and friends, then surely, we are obligated to be forever grateful to HaShem for ... everything! The big and small, and even the unpleasant; for it is all for our greater good.

When such gratitude is absent, when we fail to appreciate all that HaShem does for us and consequently feel no indebtedness toward Him, we slowly begin to fall away from observing His mitzvot, eventually incurring the wrath of the Tochacha punishments. Hence the maledictions of the Ki Tavo are bracketed by the importance of HAKARAT HATOV, to HaShem, and to the many we owe so very much!