

SEEING PUNISHMENT AS BLESSING

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. Seeing Punishment as Blessing

The Torah recounts and enumerates the 42 locations, which the Jewish people traveled to during their 40-year trek in the desert. Rashi cites Reb Moshe Ha'Darshan who explains that the initial 14 travels actually took place during the first year before the sin of the spies (which condemned the Jewish people to wander for 40 years in the desert). Eight of the locations (travels) were in the 40th year. Thus, the Jewish people only traveled to 20 locations during a 38-year period. If the Jews had traveled to all 42 locations during their 40 years of wandering, their punishment would have been unbearable. Rather, the Torah recounts the travels in order to inform us that the Jews only traveled 20 times during their wandering to communicate, "the chesed (kindness) of G'd." G'd meted out their punishment with kindness so that their wandering would be bearable.

Why is it important for us to know that the punishment meted out in the desert was done with chesed? The Torah describes the curses (tochacha) that will befall the Jewish people when they deviate from adhering to the Word of G'd. These curses are so severe that they go beyond one's comprehension. Yet, regarding the wanderings, the Torah wants us to understand that it was meted out with kindness.

The Midrash cites a verse from Tehillim, (Psalms) "Nacheesa k'tzone amecha... You were led like a flock of sheep by Moshe and Aaron...." There is an argument in the Midrash regarding the symbolism of the word "Nacheesa (led)," which everyone agrees is an acronym. Rebbe Eliezer explains that the letters of "Nacheesa" stand for - "Miracles that You (G'd) performed for them. Life, You gave to them. The Sea that You split for them. Torah that You gave to them." Reb Yehoshua explains that the acronym stands for - "Wonders You performed for them. Freedom You gave to them. They went out with an upraised head. You brought awesome punishment on their enemies..." King David in Psalms is communicating that despite the wandering in the bleakness and desolation of the desert, G'd provided miracles, blessing, and benefit to the Jewish people that was crucial and integral to their spiritual development. Had it not been for this period of wandering, the Jewish people would not have developed spiritually to the level that they had which enabled them to re-enter into a physical existence and fulfill the Torah.

Chazal tell us "The Torah was given to those who ate the Manna." The Jews needed to partake of the Manna in the desert in order to be spiritualized through it so that they could comprehend and process the Torah at the most advanced level. Therefore, it is important for the Torah to

communicate that G'd meted out the punishment with chesed for one to understand that what may seem like a curse/difficult experience is actually in one's best interest. Similar to the Mishna in Tractate Berachos, which teaches us "Just as one blesses/thanks G'd for the good, one must also do so for the bad." When tragedy (G'd forbid) befalls a person, he must acknowledge G'd with the blessing of "Dayan Ha'Emes - The True Judge." Although one recognizes and understands conceptually that punishment is rehabilitative, he does not rationally see and experience its value. However, the 40-year experience of the desert brought the Jews to another level - qualifying them to be the people who can live by G'd's Torah in a physical context until the end of time. This is a recognizable/quantifiable benefit of the punishment.

Although the Jewish people were punished for the sin of the spies by wandering in the desert, they only traveled to 20 locations (and not 42) during a 38-year period, which were replete with miracles and blessing. It is thus important for one to interpret the happenings of existence as blessings from G'd (if one can) and not as anything else.

2. Recording Events for Posterity

Ramban in his commentary sites Rambam's Guide to the Perplexed, "What is the value of Moshe's recounting the 42 travels of the Jewish people in the desert, which occurred over a 40-year period? The miracles, which had transpired on behalf of the Jewish people in the desert, were a vivid reality for those who experienced them. The revealed miracles of the Manna, wellspring of Miriam, and the Clouds of Glory were a factual part of history for the generation of the desert. However, future generations will claim that these events were merely folklore and myth - and they did not actually happen. The Jews experienced many miracles in the desert in locations that were desolate and far from civilization, locations that had no vegetation, bread, or wine. Nevertheless G'd provided for them all of their sustenance. G'd understands and knows that with the passage of time people will deny these facts. People will say that the Jewish people survived in the desert because they traveled near the peripheries of communities and therefore were able to secure their needs and in fact, there were no miracles. The Jews survived in the desert as the Arab nomads do...Therefore G'd wanted to dispel any consideration that the miracles of the desert never occurred. G'd told Moshe that he must record all that had transpired in the desert so that the future generations should understand that their survival was based on miracle."

It is interesting to note that what Rambam writes regarding the recording of the travels in the desert is similar to what Ramban writes regarding the mitzvah of remembering the exodus from Egypt. Ramban explains that the mitzvah to recall continuously the exodus of Egypt is a central theme that pervades many aspects of Judaism. He explains that it is important never to forget the revealed miracles of Egypt because not every generation is worthy to merit revealed miracles. As time passes, unless people are reminded continuously that revealed miracles did take place when we left Egypt, it will be forgotten and mankind, including the Jew, will attribute the events to the natural order - unrelated to the Hand of G'd/Divine Providence. When one recalls the revealed miracles of

Egypt, he understands that the Omnipotent Power/G'd is actually orchestrating all the functions of existence. Nature itself is the Hand of G'd/miracle. Similarly, Moshe recounted the 42 locations to which the Jews had traveled so that we should not forget that our survival in the desert was based on miracle.

The Midrash at beginning of the Portion of Bereishis cites Reb Yitzchak who asks, "If the Torah is a book of law and obligations why does it start with the historical accounting of creation? It is because ultimately the nations of the world will condemn the Jewish people for taking that which is not theirs. Their right to the Land of Israel will be contested. They will be accused of being plunderers/thieves. Thus, G'd begins the Torah with a detailed accounting of Creation and the various generations who were subject to Divine Justice (the generation of the Great Flood, and the Generation of dispersion). This indicates that the world is for G'd to give and to take. G'd chose to give the Land of Israel to the Jewish people as their eternal portion."

Chazal explain that the Torah recounts the locations traveled by the Jewish people in the desert so that future generations should not deny the miracles that occurred. Therefore, it follows that regarding the Creation of the world, Reb Yitzchak/Chazal should have explained that the reason the Torah begins with Creation is so that one should not forget or deny that the miracle of Creation was the Hand of G'd and it did not evolve by itself. Nevertheless, Reb Yitzchak does not offer this explanation, but rather he explains that the Torah starts with the historical recounting of creation to communicate that the world is for G'd to give and to take as He chooses. Why is the explanation of Chazal regarding creation different from that of the exodus of Egypt and the recounting of the travels of the desert? How do we reconcile Ramban and Rambam with Reb Yitzchak of the Midrash?

Chovos Ha'Levavos writes that if one were to be born with fully developed intelligence as an adult, he would not consider for a moment that the world was not G'd's handiwork/creation. One would have to be of limited intelligence not to recognize G'd's Infinite genius in creation. The Torah does not need to respond to this limited individual because G'd's imprint is obvious in every aspect of existence. However, the Torah needs to record the 42 locations traveled by the Jews in the desert and the redemption from Egypt because they transpired within the context of a natural existence. Thus, it is possible for those miraculous events to be denied by future generations.

3. Man, the Impressionable Being

The Torah states, "Hashem spoke to Moshe...saying...When you cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the Land...But if you do not drive out the inhabitants ...those of them who you leave shall be pins in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they will harass you upon the Land in which you dwell. And it shall be that what I had meant to do to them, I shall do to you."

Ramban explains, "The Torah tells us that the idolaters who are not removed from the Land will be like "pins" in the eyes of the Jewish people. Meaning, they will dull the sensitivity of the Jew to see

what is unacceptable as plausible. By being exposed to their corrupted and warped value system and way of life, the Jew himself will lose his clarity and ultimately assume behavior that is unacceptable for a Jew. This is similar to a judge who accepts bribery." If a judge accepts a bribe, regardless of his integrity and interest to bring about justice, he will be disqualified because he has lost his impartiality. It is impossible for one who is bribed not to be biased/affected. The Gemara tells us that if one has any conflict of interest he is disqualified as a witness or a judge. The Gemara in Bava Basera states that even Moshe and Aaron, as great as they were, would be disqualified as witnesses if they would have a conflict of interest. Any degree of conflict of interest affects one's clarity. Therefore, being exposed to the values and behavior of the pagans who were not driven from the Land will ultimately impact negatively upon the sensitivity of the Jew- as a pin/sharp object would diminish one's eyesight.

Ramban continues, "If you are exposed to these idolaters, you will no longer see or understand. They will teach you to do their abominations and serve their gods. After you have lost your clarity, they will plunder you. Since you did not uproot all of them from the Land and consequently assumed their values and lifestyle, you will be exiled because you will no longer be worthy to dwell in it."

Negative influences to which one is exposed, affect the individual in a subliminal and insidious manner. The Mishna in Pirkei Avos states, "You should distance yourself from a bad neighbor and do not attach yourself to an evil person (rasha)." Why does the Mishna not use the same term of "distancing oneself" from the evil person as it does regarding a bad neighbor? One would think that just as one must distance himself from a bad neighbor one should definitely distance himself from an evil person. Nevertheless the Mishna only suggests that one should not attach himself/become intimate with a "rasha (evil person)." Evidently, one needs to be more careful with one's bad neighbor than a rasha.

The commentators explain that one distances himself naturally from that which is obviously evil. However, if one sees some value (financial gain) in associating with the rasha, to this the Mishna tells us - "do not attach yourself to him." Because ultimately, he will fall and those who are associated with him will have a similar fate. On the other hand, regarding a neighbor who is only bad (corrupted values and character) and not evil, because his failings are more subtle, one will not be repulsed by him as with the rasha. One may engage with the bad neighbor on a casual basis thinking that since he is not intimately involved with him no harm will result. Since, one's defenses are not heightened he will be vulnerable to the negative values of the bad neighbor. Therefore, the concern of a negative influence from a bad neighbor is something more serious than from one who is truly evil.

Rambam writes that if one lives in community with heretics/evil people, one must leave the community. If one cannot find a proper community that is free of heresy, one must even go into a cave or a desert- if need be. Chinuch writes, "Man is developed through his actions and his environment." G'd therefore commanded the Jewish people to completely uproot the pagans from the Land so as not be exposed to any level of negative influence which would desensitize them

from the path of Torah.

If one were to describe what is considered "acceptable behavior" in our society today to someone from thirty years ago, he would regard it as disturbing and uncivilized. However, we ourselves do not cringe and find this behavior intolerable. We manage to go through our daily life unmoved by the corrupted society, which surrounds us. This is an indication that we have become influenced and desensitized by values that we should regard as repulsive.

4. The Power of His Actions He has Told to His People Regarding the distribution of the portions of the Land of Israel among the tribes, the Torah states, "...this is the Land that shall fall to you as an inheritance..." Rashi at the beginning of the Portion of Bereishis cites the Midrash, which cites a verse from Psalms, "The power of His actions He told to His people to give them the portion of the nations.' Reb Yitzchak explains the verse to mean, 'Ultimately the nations of the world will condemn the Jewish people for conquering the Land of Israel, which is not theirs. They will be accused of being plunderers/thieves. Their right to the Land will be contested. Thus, G'd begins the Torah with a detailed accounting of Creation and the various generations who were subject to Divine Justice...This indicates that the world belongs to G'd for Him to give and to take. G'd chose to give the Land of Israel to the Jewish people as their eternal portion."

The Midrash Tanchuma explains the verse in Psalms differently than Reb Yitzchak. The Midrash states, "The power of His actions He told to His people to give them the portion of the nations.' G'd said to the Jewish people that as the Creator, I could have given you another land, yet I chose to give you the Land of Canaan. It is so that I could demonstrate to you My power. I will uproot your enemies who inhabit the Land and give it to you." The Midrash is telling us that it is evident from the verse that G'd specifically gave the Land of Israel, which was inhabited by the seven pagan nations (who lived lives of abomination), so that the Jew could understand and appreciate His power. Why is it important for the Jew to perceive G'd in this context? Simply, the more one understands and appreciates G'd, the more he will revere Him.

The Torah states, "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, 'Send forth men, if you please, and let them spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to the Children of Israel..." Moshe had sent the spies to investigate the Land before the Jewish people would enter it. They returned with horrific reports that the land devours its inhabitants and was filled with giants. Their conclusion was that the land could not be conquered. Their report was factually accurate; however, the spies did not take into account that G'd had promised the Land to the Jewish people. As the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh points out, the verse concludes, "...spy out the Land of Canaan that I give to the Children of Israel..." meaning that the Land of Canaan was a gift from G'd to the Jewish people. Despite the fact that it could not be conquered through human effort, since G'd promised the Land as a gift, He would provide them with Divine Assistance in order to conquer it. Therefore, it is important for the Jew to understand and appreciate that it is only because of G'd's beneficence that the Land is his to inhabit.

Similarly, the Midrash by citing the words of King David, "The power of His actions He told to His people to give them the portion of the nations" is communicating that the only way the Jewish people were able to conquer the Land was through miracle/G'd's intervention. Every aspect of the Land of Israel is out of the context of nature. Only G'd could have vacated the Land of its inhabitants. The very existence of the Jew in the Land is only possible with G'd's blessing. The reason G'd chose the Land of Israel specifically for the Jewish people was to demonstrate and emphasize this fact.

The Torah tells us that one is obligated to bring bikurim (new fruits) from the produce of the Land of Israel to the Temple. Although the trans-Jordan territory is considered part of Israel and has all of the mitzvos that are specific to the Land, one does not bring the new produce (bikurim) from there. Reb Yosi explains that it is because when one brings the new fruits to the Temple, he must make a declaration, which expresses his appreciation to G'd, "...it is from the Land that You (G'd) have given me..." This declaration only refers to the Land that G'd gave to the Jewish people Himself and not the land that came about through their own initiative. The trans-Jordan territory was not initially meant to be part of Israel, but it came about through the initiative of the tribes of Reuven and Gad. They had requested that it should be their portion.

The declaration of the bikurim is to express one's appreciation to G'd for the gift of the Land, which is a direct result of the "power of His actions." It could have not come about without G'd's direct intervention.

The Gemara in Tractate Kesubos states, "One who lives outside of the Land (of Israel), it is as if he has no G'd." G'd could have designated another location for His Divine Presence - yet He specifically chose the Land of Israel that contained the seven nations. This indicates that this must be the location for the Jew - to make him aware of the fact that "The power of His actions He told to His people to give them the portion of the nations." We see that it is not only important for the world to know that G'd gave the Land as an eternal inheritance to His people (as per Reb Yitzchak), but also it is important for the Jew to appreciate the mechanism through which it became his - "The power of His actions He told to His people to give them the portion of the nations."

5. How Does a Jew Perceive His Success? (from Mattos) The Torah tells us how the spoils of war were divided from the battle with Midian. Regarding the livestock, the Torah states, "All the livestock that was taken in battle was divided." Ramban explains that initially all the animals that were taken as spoils were divided. Meaning, not one animal died in the interim (from the time they were taken to the time they were divided). This was a miracle.

The Torah is very careful and deliberate regarding the information, which it communicates to us. What is the significance and value of the Torah informing us that tens of thousands of animals were taken as spoils and not one of them died? Regarding the plague of pestilence that came upon Egypt, the Torah tells us that Pharaoh wanted to know if the plague had affected the flocks and herds of the Jewish people, or was the plague limited to the Egyptians. Pharaoh was informed that

not one animal belonging to a Jew had died from the plague. This was a revealed miracle - indicating that the hand of G'd was only upon that which belonged to the Egyptians. However, regarding the spoils of Midian, what is the significance and value of informing us that a miracle was performed, that not even one animal had died?

When Yaakov prepared to confront his brother Esav, he had taken certain precautions such as dividing his family into two groups. In the midst of this preparation, the Torah tells us that he had crossed back over the Yaabok River. The Gemara in Tractate Chullin explains that Yaakov had crossed back over the river in order to retrieve his small earthenware vessels that he had left behind. Although Yaakov was a man of great wealth, he nevertheless returned to retrieve something of inconsequential value because, "A tzaddik values his money/possessions as much as (more than) his life." Everything that one has is an endowment from G'd - thus giving it value and purpose. Even the seemingly worthless earthenware vessels of Yaakov, had to be considered because G'd gave them to him for some conceivable purpose. Therefore, the tzaddik values his assets/possessions, regardless of their monetary value.

Regarding the basket/box in which Moshe was placed by his mother into the Nile, the Torah tells us that Yocheved constructed a "tevas gomeh - a box made of gomeh wood." The Midrash explains that the value of the Torah sharing with us the type of wood that was used by Yocheved is to inform us that she had used the least expensive wood that was available. Yocheved understood, because her son Moshe was definitely the future redeemer of Israel that he would survive the waters of the Nile regardless of the vessel in which she placed him. The only value of her constructing a box was to conceal a revealed miracle. Spending more than was necessary for this purpose would be considered a waste. Thus, from this we learn the principle that, "A tzaddik values his money/assets as much as (more than) his life."

The Jewish people captured thousands of animals as spoils of war from Midian. The Torah goes out of its way to inform us that G'd performed a miracle (so that not one animal should die from the time of capture until dividing the spoils) in order to teach us that the animals, as any other asset that we possess, are an endowment from G'd. Again the Torah is reiterating and communicating the principle of, "A tzaddik values his money/assets as much as (more than) his life."

The Gemara tells us that one's yearly stipend is determined from one Rosh Hashanah to the next. All of one's income that he receives throughout the year is an endowment from G'd- unrelated to one's own efforts and achievement. We therefore need to value and appreciate all that we have been given - understanding that we are only beneficiaries of G'd's kindness. Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky and [Torah.org](https://torah.org).

Rabbi Kalatsky is the founder of the [Yad Avraham Institute](https://yadavrahaminstitute.org), a New York-based learning center whose mission is to disseminate Torah to Jews of all backgrounds and walks of life.