

ONE MAN'S CURSE - ANOTHER MAN'S BLESSING

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

A large section of Parshas Ki Savo is occupied by the Tochacha - the Admonition and warning issued by Moshe to the Children of Israel. Their acceptance of the Torah and adherence to its mitzvos would assure that the blessings of Heaven would constantly rain upon them. Conversely, straying from the path of Torah would, G-d forbid, ultimately result in destruction, exile, and myriad curses. Something "light" to put one in the mood for the impending Days of Awe and Judgement...

Indeed, even during times when the cycle of weekly Torah readings did not regulate that we read Parshas Ki Savo before Rosh Hashana (due to its place in the cycle), a takana (enactment) was in place that dictated that the Tochacha be read communally before the new year (See Megillah 31b). While the reason for this enactment would seem to be in order to "scare" us into teshuva (repentance) before the Day of Judgement, in fact the Gemara (ibid.) gives a different reason: In order that the year, and its curses, cease - allowing the new year to begin with new blessings and good fortune.

In what way does broadcasting the curses that will befall those who stray from the Torah (and have indeed come about with chilling accuracy over the course of Jewish history in exile...) ensure that the curses themselves will come to a halt? By reading about the curses, do we somehow absolve ourselves of responsibility for our misdeeds and shortcomings?

Furthermore, sefarim write, as does the holy Zohar, that while to the untrained eye the Tochacha consists of curses and affliction, these harsh words of admonition are in truth a veil for untold beracha and good fortune. Indeed, the commentators go to great lengths to demonstrate how words which on the surface seem to imply suffering and pain, in fact contain great and plentiful blessings and goodness. If this is indeed the case, however, how can we reconcile the reading of the hidden blessings with the concept of, "So that the year, and its curses, cease?"

Rabbi Itzele Blaser zt"l, in his sefer Koch'vei Ohr, addresses the concept of the "blessings hidden within the curses." He takes the following approach: In the Admonition, we read (27:66):

Your life will hang in the balance; you will be frightened night and day, and you will not be sure of your livelihood.

There is no bigger curse, it seems, than not having some "money in the bank" - and not knowing from where tomorrow's meal will come.

Let us compare this, however, with how the Torah describes the Mon (Mannah) in parshas Eikev (Devarim 8:3):

He afflicted you, and let you hunger. Then He fed you the manna, that you did not know, nor did your forefathers know, in order to make you know that not by bread alone does man live, but rather by that which emanates from the mouth of Hashem does man live!

From here it appears that there is no greater blessing than the knowledge that we have nothing, but that which Hashem gives us. That we have no "money in the bank," and that one can never be sure of his livelihood if not for the grace of the Almighty. Our lives indeed "hang in the balance," and the purpose of the manna was to teach us such.

This leaves us with the puzzling question: Is the fear and uncertainty of realizing that life offers no guarantees, not even for tomorrow, a blessing or a curse?

It is told that a hapless Jew once ascended upon High, having lived a long and less-than-fruitful life. There, he was told the unfortunate news that, because of his misdeeds, he would have to descend to Gehinom as opposed to being admitted to Gan Eden. Or, if he preferred, his soul could descend once again to the physical realm, where he would be given another chance to get it right. Before making his fateful decision, he asked for permission to see Gan Eden and Gehinom, in order to fully understand his options.

The administering angel first took him to the gates of Gan Eden. Inside, he saw a tremendous, sparkling beis medrash (study hall). Holy neshamos sat and studied the Torah with great fervour and joy. The din of their voices rose to a crescendo, and not once did anyone stop for even a moment to take a break. "This," the angel told him, "is the first chamber of Gan Eden. Now let me take you 'downstairs'."

There, at the gates of Gehinom, he was once again given a "taste" of the World to Come. He was shown a great beis medrash, packed with sefarim. Inside, souls sat and studied the Torah, not once stopping to take a break from their studies. Confused, he turned to the administering angel. "But I don't understand - they look exactly the same!"

"Correct," the angel said. "For them, it is Gan Eden - and for them, it is Gehinom."

The idea of blessings and curses contained in the same pasuk (verse), says R' Itzele, is that one person's greatest curse is another person's blessing. For one who has not cultivated his bitachon - his faith that after all his effort and exertion, his parnassah (livelihood) is ultimately in the hands of Hashem - not knowing what the future holds in store is indeed a tremendous curse. He feels stress and anxiety as he struggles to cope with what he sees as his own inability to earn a decent living.

But for the man who has developed a sense of faith - and has come to the realization that, try as he might, there is nothing he can do to guarantee future success and prosperity - for him "not knowing" is a blessing in disguise. It gives him the opportunity to test and express his faith, thereby elevating

his bitachon to a new level.

Perhaps, then, this is the idea of, "So that the year, and its curses, may cease." Before Rosh Hashana, our Sages instructed us to read the Admonition and its curses - which are in fact blessings in disguise - in order that we realize that our lives are already stock full of blessings and grace. And if we don't see it that way, perhaps we need to adjust and calibrate our perspective, and not to keep looking for something better. To rethink our priorities, and realize that what on the outside appears as curses and affliction, may in fact be a hidden opportunity for growth and prosperity.

While we wish and hope that the new year bring success, affluence, and prosperity for all Jews - in its most simple sense - it is important to realize that "blessing" and "curse" are not absolute. They are relative terms, and depend very much on our perspective, and the attitude with which we approach the scenarios and circumstances that life dishes up.

Have a good Shabbos.

In memory of my grandfather, Chaim ben Yaakov alav ha-shalom.

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