

A RANDOM CURSE OR A CURSE OF RANDOMNESS?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Two parshios breed terror in the heart of every G-d-fearing Jew: BeChukosai and Ki Savo. Both parshios deal with the blessings to be expected for loyalty to G-d and His Torah, and, as one would expect, the potential curses for disloyalty and disobedience to G-d. Our generation can find some consolation, perhaps, in knowing that we are living on the "other side" of the curses so-to-speak, in a position, historically, to view the negative prophecies as being true, but already fulfilled.

However, no one should make the mistake of assuming that the pogroms and the Holocaust of the past gives us carte blanche to forsake Torah in our generation, G-d forbid. It is very difficult to read the books of the prophets and know for certain to what they refer, let alone read the mind of G-d! The apparent peace we experience can merely be the "calm" before the "storm," G-d forbid, as so often it has been. Certainly recent political events act as storm clouds over the horizon.

However, if one had to identify the worse curse of all, he or she would probably overlook the worse curse from the Torah's perspective. This is because, in our generation, we relate more to **this world** than to **the world to come**; we relate more to **physical** suffering than we do to **spiritual** suffering. That mistaken perspective is itself a "curse."

One of my more frustrated students recently asked me,

"It just isn't fair. Here I sit in yeshiva learning Torah and sacrificing so much to do the mitzvos, such as being modest. I have friends who are running across the warm sand of mixed beaches with their boyfriends or girlfriends, totally oblivious to G-d and His Torah! And what do I experience? Hardship. Parental Pressure. Worry about my future. What do they feel? Bliss! It's not that I expect a better life than what I have, especially since I'm grateful that I have discovered Torah. But why does G-d let them get away with all of that? What kind of 'curse' are they feeling for their disobedience to Torah?"

I don't think my student was trying to bring judgment down on his friends, or that he would take delight in seeing lightening come down from the sky and make it perfectly clear that their ways are not in consonance with Torah. I think the point of the complaint is more: Where's the justice in all of this? Does G-d care about what we do, or doesn't He? If not, then why am I making all these sacrifices?

The classic work, The Nefesh HaChaim, deals with this question on a different level. He explains that the concept of "kores," of being "cut-off" from the Jewish people, doesn't mean the person just drops dead on the spot. On the contrary, a person could live for quite a long time, at least until the age of fifty somewhat blissful. Rather, kores is the concept whereby the lower part of the soul becomes somewhat severed from its upper parts, leaving a person with the **feeling** and belief that they have no soul. Such a person may **think** they have chosen not to be spiritual, but the truth is, they are being **denied** spirituality.

In other words, the worse punishment a Jew can suffer is to not feel Jewish, and to not feel any pressing reason to do something about it. In our day and age of physical comfort, we barely relate to spiritual suffering; we relate better to physical suffering and avoid it like the plague. For this reason, when we look at the curses, the one that bothers us the least is that G-d will simply turn His back on us and leave us to our own devices.

If you will not listen to me and walk contrary (b'keri) to Me, then I will walk contrary to you in anger (b'keri) ... (VaYikrah 26:27)

Rashi points out that the word "keri" is from the word "mikreh" which means "irregularly," or, "by chance" (26:21) In other words, if we deal with G-d and His Torah inconsistently, then He will become inconsistent with us, creating the impression that life is random; Divine Providence will become less obvious ... hester panim (hiding of G-d's "face") will become prevalent.

Can there be a bigger opening for doubt in G-d and Torah than this, the greatest curse of all?

In fact, later, Rashi says that this will lead to Jewish doubt in the authenticity of Torah, and that haters of Torah and its adherents will arise from **within** the Jewish nation itself (26:17)! Today's disbelievers and critics of Torah and its followers perhaps can consider themselves a fulfillment of this prophecy!

There is an account in the Talmud of a Neron who was a commander in the Roman army at the time of the destruction of Yerushalayim and the second Temple. It says that on his way to victory, he shot four arrows in each direction and they all ended up heading toward Yerushalayim. At that point, he asked a cheder child for a verse from the Torah, and the child responded with a verse that speaks of G-d having Edom (Rome) take revenge against the Jewish People. Realizing that G-d was using him to fulfill the prophecy of Divine revenge against the Jewish People, Neron packed it in and converted to Judaism instead! He had read the writing on the wall, and took it to heart, and as a reward, the great Rebi Meir descended from him (Gittin 56a).

If we could only be so astute. Year after year we read verses from the Torah that describe our portion of history with pinpoint accuracy, and yet, we still don't respond. Instead of seeing ourselves and what has happened to us as the fulfillment of prophecy, and move ourselves to come closer to

G-d and His Torah, we assume that the curses in the Torah have little, if any, relevance to us.

G-d predicted that, too. "Keri" means that we will become so wrapped up in our own period of time, in our own lives, in our own perspectives, that we will become convinced that G-d is not there, and that even if He is, He doesn't really care what we do, whether we act in consonance with the Torah, or against it. It means that G-d will hold back with extreme patience as we wander aimlessly, and blissfully, through modern history with little or no sense of appreciation of what it means to be His people, a holy people. We have become like children whose teacher has left the classroom for so long a time that we forget he will eventually come back! The biggest curse of all: to have no sense of being part of the curse!

However, the Torah ends off with the biggest warning of all:

I will remember My covenant with Ya'akov, and My covenant with Yitzchak, and even My covenant with Avraham, and I will remember the Land. (26:42)

The day will come when G-d will have had enough. A time will come, pre-destined since the beginning of time, one that takes everyone and everything into account, when history will once again yield to direct Divine Providence, as it did in Egypt 3,309 years ago. It will be an awesome "day" when the illusion of "keri" will end, and the reality of **reality** will prevail. Then G-d will "look" around and ask,

"Now, who held on until the end? Who believed in Me when it was difficult to do so? Who read into the verses of the Torah and understood that what seemed to be happenstance was really Me working **through** nature?"

This is the measure of a person's worth. There's cleverness, and then there's cleverness. From the Western point of view, one is clever if they can take full advantage of their physical abilities to maximize their return in life, physically. From a Torah perspective, a clever person is one who sees the future today, one who thinks into the events around him, one who is smart enough to look past the illusions of "natural" life and discover the miracle operating behind the scenes.

We would do well to learn a lesson from Neron. We don't have to read the writing on the wall, just the writing in the Book, **the** Book, and take it to heart. We are living in special times, which requires special sacrifices, in order to remain the special people we were created to be. This way, when G-d remembers Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov, He'll remember us also-for good!

It's a heavy message from a heavy parsha. But then again, heh, **life** is heavy too.

Have a great Shabbos,

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