Beyond Reach
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In the concluding lines of this week's parashah, the term minaged (from afar) refers to the geographic fate of Moshe: he may view the Land “from afar” on Mt. Nevo, but will not be allowed to enter it (Deut. 32:52). Rachel’s poem above, titled with this word and written in Tel Aviv in 1930, depicts a situation of existential absence and desire.

Like other Hebrew writers of her generation, Rachel’s decision to write in Hebrew and not in her native tongue—in this case, Russian—was shaped by an ideological commitment to Hebrew as a language of national renaissance. Rachel’s poems are filled with biblical allusions; in this poem, the identification with the biblical figure emerges from a seminal moment of psychological crisis: the abrupt denial of a dream on the brink of its joyous fulfillment.

Some readers understand the poem as referring to the poet’s own life—to the anguish of her illness (tuberculosis), on account of which she was exiled from Kibbutz Degania, and to which she eventually succumbed, in a small, rooftop apartment at the end of Bogroshov Street in Tel Aviv. The final stanza’s appearance on the poet’s gravestone in the Kinneret Cemetery reinforces this poignant, though ultimately limited, reading. The poem itself insists on something both more intensely intimate and infinitely cosmic: everyone is alone with their own Nevo, their own frustrated dream. The compact resonance of the Hebrew delivers a strong blow: ish unevo lo. In this case, the artifact of the poem echoes beyond the poet’s death, casting its shadow-like wings over the vast land before it.
On the most visceral level, reading the blessings and curses at a time when we are focused on imagining new and nobler versions of ourselves and our communities highlights the stark consequences of our choices. If we make good choices, good things will happen. If we make poor choices—well, less good things await us. Our behavior and choices really do have consequences in the world. Using the liturgy to confront the darkness that is promised if we do not choose well may keep us on the right path. I think there is something to this, but I believe there is a richer and more meaningful connection between the blessings and curses and Rosh Hashanah.

The Talmud—in the name of Abaye—suggests a more optimistic answer to our question: “So that the year may end along with its curses.” As we finish the year, we read all of the curses—putting them behind us, as if to say, so should our troubles be behind us. Then we can begin the new year with a clean slate, fresh for our new ways of being in the world, without any negative baggage. Indeed, this is a lovely framing for the end of one year and the beginning of another. But I still believe there is more behind Ezra’s insistence on reading the blessings and curses in public as our communities move into Rosh Hashanah.

A curious geonic (7–10th century) tradition referenced by Maimonides provides deeper insight into Ezra’s decree. Most often, when we read the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy we experience them as promises of reward for loyalty to the Covenant and threats of violent consequences for rejecting God. However, Maimonides shares a tradition that conceptualizes the blessings and curses in a completely novel way.

Maimonides suggests that hearing the blessings and curses in Parashat Ki Tavo, which come when the Israelites are about to enter into the Land of Israel before the original conquest, constituted the fulfillment of an actual mitzvah! (Kelal shelishi in Sefer Hamitzvot) This is a startling assertion, transforming the blessings and curses from a series of promises and threats to the level of commandment. But what was this mitzvah?

In a very provocative remark, the Talmud suggests that prior to entering into the Land of Israel, the nation as a whole was held accountable only for the public misdeeds of individuals. If a person sinned in private, only the individual who misbehaved was held accountable. But as the nation prepared to cross the Jordan River, something changed. From that moment onward, the entire community of Israel became culpable for even the private misdeeds of other people (BT Sanhedrin 43b)! We are commanded to recognize our interconnectedness. Blessings would be earned and experienced by the group. Communal calamity would be the price for individual destructive decisions. Thus when the Israelites stood at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval, they heard the blessings that await those who listen to God’s commandments and the punishments promised to those who disobey—but they also heard a message that transcended all of these specifics. The entire nation was asked to understand itself as radically interconnected and to appreciate the imperative that emerges from this realization.

The mitzvah embedded in these verses of the promises and curses, then, is the mitzvah of arevut: seeing the profound interconnectedness of the Jewish people. Each Jew is the “guarantor” (arev) of every other Jew. That is, each Jew is fundamentally responsible for all other Jews. Through the blessings and curses of Parashat Ki Tavo, the Torah is saying, we are in this project of living together.

Arevut—feeling and acting on a sense of responsibility for those around us—in Judaism does not fall under the category of altruism. Helping someone else is not an act of kindness. It is bound up in a fundamental responsibility that we must all feel toward others. Just as I am responsible for my own ethical life, I am responsible for that of others as well. If my neighbor falls and fails, it is my pain and my failure too. And if I receive blessing, it is not simply because I as an individual have earned it; the group also shares responsibility for my success.

I like to think that these ideas stand behind the reasons for Ezra’s decree to read the blessings and curses before Rosh Hashanah. At a time when many of us are focused on our own individual growth and betterment, we are reminded of the profound interconnectedness of all our communities and lives. I can’t be a better person if I ignore the state of the individuals in my community. This is the mitzvah of arevut that I personally need to hear as I move into this holiday season.

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