

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



Curses and Blessings

Dr. Galeet Dardashti, Assistant Professor of Jewish Music and Musician-in-Residence, JTS

I just recorded a riff/improvisation on a Moroccan rendition of the *piyyut* “*Ahot Ketanah*.” The *piyyut*—particularly beloved by Sephardim as the first piece sung for Rosh Hashanah—references Ki Tavo’s many curses and pleads that this year’s curses come to an end. When I chant it for the High Holidays, the entire *kahal* holds the drone underneath. The Talmud (BT Megillah 31b) explains that Parashat Ki Tavo ends with incessant curses so that we leave them behind and begin the New Year with only blessings.

Sung excerpts from “*Ahot Ketanah*” (Little Sister)

By Avraham Hazzan Gerundi (13th-century Spain)

The little sister—her prayers
she arranges, and her praises she recites
Please, God, heal her illnesses now.
May the year and its curses come to an end!

With pleasant words she calls out to You
and with song and praises that befit You.
Until when will You hide Your eyes?
May the year and its curses come to an end!

Raise the foremost of kingdoms up from degradation
For in the pit of exile her soul is disintegrated
May the year and its curses come to an end!

Be strong and rejoice
And you shall ascend to Zion
And He shall declare:
“Clear! Clear! Her paths.”
May the New Year and its blessings begin!

Listen to Dr. Dardashti’s recording at www.jtsa.edu/curses-and-blessings

Ki Tavo 5777

כי תבא תשע"ז



White Supremacism and Jewish Chosenness

Hillel Ben-Sasson, Visiting Professor of Israel Studies, JTS

Only a month has passed since the horrifying marches of white nationalists, white supremacists, and neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, Virginia, and the repugnant images and voices from that weekend refuse to fade away. More than anything else, this event reminds us all that hatred toward minorities in general and Jews in particular has never been completely eradicated, and might never be. Yet it also compels us to return to our own idea of the chosen people, and to examine whether our particularism is necessarily a chauvinistic one, as so many have argued over the course of time, from Haman to the present day.

In our parashah, it seems at first glance that the idea of chosenness is what we might call a “zero-sum game.” Our chosenness, it seems, implies that we are chosen over others, and assigned a status above and beyond all other nations, as the Torah writes:

And the LORD has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people who shall observe all His commandments and that **He will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations that He has made . . .** (Deut. 26:18–19; emphasis added)

Yet a closer and more careful look at the paragraph in which these lines appear reveals a far more nuanced picture:

The LORD your God commands you this day to observe these laws and rules; observe them faithfully with all your heart and soul. You have affirmed this day that the LORD is your God, that you will walk in His ways, that you will observe His laws and commandments and rules, and that you will obey

Him. And the LORD has affirmed this day that you are, as He promised you, His treasured people who shall observe all His commandments and that He will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations that He has made ; and that you shall be, as He promised, a holy people to the LORD your God. (Deut. 26:16–19)

Israel's chosenness is not an automatic birthright, bestowed upon the community of Israelites unconditionally. It emerges out of a reciprocal act of choosing. The Torah makes sure to mention that it is us who chose first—the community affirms its relationship with God by entering into a covenant with Him, walking in His ways, and observing His mitzvot. God, at the same time, affirms his choice of this specific people, aspiring to fulfill through them the very same goal—the creation of a community united in abiding to His righteous words and decrees.

In this context, it is crucial to note how being “above all the nations” entails fame, reputation (“name”), and glory. High status, indeed, but a status that does not actually include any automatically bequeathed benefits. Quite to the contrary, being “above” other nations is equated with being a holy nation. And what is a holy nation? That we learn from the Holiness Code (Lev. 17–26): a holy nation is not only a community that abides by the highest moral standards. It is a group of people who actively strive, in a never-ending progress toward the idea of perfection, to become holy like God Himself.

A careful reading of the paragraphs enveloping the chosenness statement discussed here lends further support to the notion that Jewish particularism is anything but chauvinistic, and ought to rather be viewed as an uncompromisingly high moral standard.

The two paragraphs preceding the verses quoted earlier—a set of instructions pertaining to the rite of presenting the first fruit in the Temple, and a declaration on completing tithing obligations—specifically mention that one is to share one's abundance with the weak and needy. In the first we find the instruction to celebrate with those who are not members of the community: “And you shall enjoy, together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst, all the bounty that your God has bestowed upon you and your household” (Deut. 26:11). In the second instance, a declaration of the fulfillment of duties to a larger set of marginalized groups: “I have cleared

out the consecrated portion from the house; and I have given it to the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, just as You commanded me” (26:13).

In the same vein, a list of curses that follow shortly after the chosenness paragraph pointedly curses not only the idolater, or the one who transgresses proper sexual conduct; it also includes the following curses:

Cursed be he that insults his father or his mother. And all the people shall say: Amen.

Cursed be he that removes his neighbor's landmark. And all the people shall say: Amen.

Cursed be he that misdirects a blind person on their way. And all the people shall say: Amen.

Cursed be he that subverts the justice due to the stranger, fatherless, and widow. And all the people shall say: Amen. (Deut. 27:16-19)

By both content and structure, by both wording and concept, the book of Deuteronomy transmits its cautionary guidance, as if saying to us: *Beware! Being chosen does not and never will entail any kind of supremacy—racial, religious, social, or otherwise. It is a form of ongoing duty, a relentless aspiration to holiness, a lifelong commitment to following the footsteps of the divine—primarily in our interactions with those less fortunate, from within our people and outside of it.*

Reading our parashah, the conclusion becomes clear. The despicable groups who gathered under the banner of racism in Charlottesville are not only an abomination in the eyes of every decent American citizen; they are also, according to the Torah, an abomination in the eyes of God.

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