

The Blessing of Curses: A Rosh Hashanah Puzzle

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Here's a puzzle for us to think about as we consider the spiritual work that we need to engage in over the remaining days until Yom Kippur: The Talmud tells us—in the name of Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar—that Ezra the Scribe decreed that, *for all time*, the Jewish people would read the blessings and curses in Leviticus (Parashat Behukkotai) prior to the holiday of Shavuot and those of Deuteronomy (Parashat Ki Tavo) before Rosh Hashanah ([BT Megillah 31b](#)). This decree is strange. Reading these graphic and threatening chapters, which detail the good that will come if we are faithful to God and the suffering that will be wrought if we forsake our relationship with God, is difficult at any time. Why insist that we read them publicly as we ready ourselves to celebrate these joyous holidays?

In our present-day communities, where we finish the Torah every year, the section of Leviticus that includes the curses naturally falls before Shavuot. Parashat Ki Tavo in Deuteronomy—where Moshe again offers the blessings and curses to the Israelites before they enter into the Land—also naturally falls before Rosh Hashanah in the calendar.

However, for the Jews of the Land of Israel, who in ancient times completed the Torah in three years, Ezra's decree must have been quite jarring. Presumably, these communities would have had to take out a second Torah scroll and read the curses in addition to the parashah of the week on the Sabbaths before Rosh Hashanah and Shavuot.

At any rate, Ezra's mandate presents us with a question: Why did Ezra believe it was critical that the Jewish people read the blessings and curses before Rosh Hashanah? Asked differently, in what ways might hearing this section of the Torah be important for our spiritual work during this season?

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*.

Areveut—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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