

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XLVII: Re'eh (Deut. 11:26–16:17)

Essay 1. The blessing and the curse

“See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: the blessing, when you will hear the commandments of the L-rd, your G-d, that I command you today; and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the L-rd, your G-d . . .” – Deut. 11:26–28

מדרש רבה "שמעו" לדברי תורה "והאזינו" לדברי תורה. מהו "אל-תגבהו", אל תגבהו את הטובה מלבא בעולם. "כי ה' דבר", והיכן דיבר, "אם-תאבו" וכו', "ואם-תמאנו ומריתם" וכו'. מהו "אם-תאבו ושמעתם". אמר ר' אלעזר הסייף והספר ירדו פרוקים מן השמים, אמר להן אם תעשו מה שכתוב בספר הזה, אתם ניצולים מן הסייף הזה. ואם לאו, אתם נהרגים בסייף הזה. כך אמר הקב"ה לישראל, אם עשיתם את רצוני, הרי הטוב והברכה, ואם לאו, הרי הקללה עכ"ל.

There is a **Midrash Rabbah** on the verse, “Hear and listen; don’t be haughty, For the L-rd has spoken.”¹

“Hear” the words of the Torah, “and listen” to the words of the Torah. What is [the meaning of] “do not be haughty” [tigbahu] [תגבהו]? Do not cause goodness to ascend [tigbehu] [תגבהו] so that it does not come into the world. “For the L-rd has spoken”—where did He speak? “If you are willing and heed, the goodness of the land you will eat. But if you refuse and are defiant, you will be devoured by the sword, as the mouth of the L-rd has spoken.”² What is [the meaning of], “if you are willing and heed”? Rabbi Elazar said: “The sword and the [Torah] scroll descended intertwined from Heaven. [G-d] said to them: ‘If you perform what is written in this scroll, you will be saved from this sword. If not, you will be killed with this sword.’ . . . So, the Holy One blessed be He, said to Israel: ‘If you perform My will, here is the goodness and the blessing. If not, here is the curse.’ ”

- Deut. Rabbah 4:2

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¹ Jer. 13:15.

² Isaiah 1:19–20.

צריך עיון מאי קושנא ליה דקאמר מהו "אם-תאבדו". הלא הוא תנאי פשוט וקלמה שאל מהו "אם-תאבדו" ולא שאל אף מהו "ואם-תמאננו ומריתם". ועוד דהנה לוי לומר הרי הרע והקללה דומיא דהטוב והברכה.

Question 1: **Investigation is required what difficulty he had, that he said, "What is [the meaning of], 'if you are willing' "? Isn't it an obvious condition, that if one obeys the mitzvot, G-d will reward him with goodness?**

Question 2: **Also, why did he ask, "What is [the meaning of], 'if you are willing,' " but he didn't ask also "what is [the meaning of], "But if you refuse and are defiant, you will be devoured by the sword, as the mouth of the L-rd has spoken"?"**

Question 3: **Also, the Torah speaks of "blessing and curse," so why does Rabbi Elazar say "the goodness and the blessing"?"**

Question 4: **Also, since he did say that, he should have said, "Here is the bad and the curse," parallel to "the goodness and the blessing."**

ואמרין במדרש על פסוק "מי הקדימני ואשלם", כלום עשה אדם מעקה אלא אם כן נתתי לו עליה, עשה לפני מזונה אלא אם כן נתתי לו בית, עשה לפני ציצית אלא אם כן נתתי לו טלית וכו'. נמצא שהקב"ה תחלה נותן הטוב ואחר כך אם יזכו יתוסף להם הברכה ואם לאו יאבדו אותו הטוב שמתחלה בא לעולם בחסדו הגדול ובלי שום זכות.

It is said in the Midrash on the verse, "Who can confront Me that I should repay him? Everything under Heaven belongs to Me!"³:

Who has performed circumcision for me before I gave him a male child?
Who made a parapet for me before I gave him a roof? Who made a mezuzah before I gave him a house? Who made a tassel for me before I gave him a prayer shawl?

- Lev. Rabbah 27:2

We find that the Holy One, Blessed be He, initially presents goodness, and afterwards, if the people merit, He will add a blessing for them. But if they do not merit, He will make them lose the goodness that initially came to the world undeserved, through His great kindness. Thus, the answer to Question 3 is that Rabbi Elazar states "the goodness and the blessing" to emphasize that we initially receive an undeserved goodness, and only then is there a test to see whether we fulfill His commandments, in which case we get to retain the initial goodness, as well as receiving a further blessing.

³ Job 41:3.

ולכן אמר "שמעו" לדברי תורה "והאזינו" לדברי תורה, כלומר למדו התורה ושמרו מצותיה ו"אל-תגבוהו" את הטובה מלבא בעולם. אל תהיו גורמים שאותו הטוב שהיה הקב"ה נותן לעולם בתסדו הגדול, הבית, והטלית, ובגנים וזכרים פני שימול אותם אביהם יתעבב מלבא בראותו שאין אתם מקיימים מצותיו. "כי ה' דבר", והיכן דבר, "אם-תאבו ושמעתם" וכו'.

Therefore, [our Midrash] said “Hear” the words of the Torah, “and listen” to the words of the Torah, as if to say, “learn the Torah and guard its commandments, and do not cause goodness to ascend so that it does not come into the world.” Regarding the goodness that the Holy One, Blessed be He, gives to the world through His great kindness, e.g., the house, and the prayer shawl, and male children in order that their fathers will circumcise them—do not cause Him to prevent them from coming, when He sees that you do not fulfill His commandments. “For the L-rd has spoken”—where did He speak? “If you are willing and heed, the goodness of the land you will eat. But if you refuse and are defiant, you will be devoured by the sword, as the mouth of the L-rd has spoken.”

ולפי שמפשוט הכתוב נראה הפך מה שאמרנו, משום הכי קא בעי מהו "אם-תאבו ושמעתם" דמשמע שעד שיהיו צדיקים הקב"ה אינו נותן להם הטובה, ותיירץ הסייף והספר וכו' שאם תעשו מה שכתוב בספר אתם ניצולים וכו'. ומעתה אם יש ספר ובתוכו מצות מעקה מצות ציצית ומזוזה ומצנת מילה מוכרח הוא שפבר הטובה תהיה בעולם, ומנה לא דבר הכתוב רק על הטוב שבא לאחר קיום המצות. ומשום הכי סיים דבריו הרי הטוב והברכה, הטוב שקודם לקיום המצנה והברכה הבאה לאחר קיום המצנה, ואם לאו הרי הקללה ואין צורך לומר הרי הרע, וגם לא קשה מידי על "אם-תמאנו וקריתם".

The plain meaning of the Scripture, “if you are willing and heed,” appears the opposite of what we have said, and because of this, [the Midrash] asks, what is the meaning of “If you are willing and heed, the goodness of the land you will eat.” That is, “if you are willing and heed” seems to mean that until they will be righteous, the Holy One, Blessed be He, won’t give them goodness. But we’ve said that G-d gives goodness first, and then will add to it if the people are righteous. The solution of the Midrash is that, “the sword and the [Torah] scroll descended intertwined from Heaven; [G-d] said to them: ‘If you perform what is written in this scroll, you will be saved from this sword.’”

Now, if there is a scroll, and within it is written a commandment of a parapet, a commandment of prayer shawl and mezuzah, and a commandment of circumcision, it’s obligatory that there already be goodness in the world. Thus, the Scripture, “if you are willing and heed, the goodness of the land you will eat” is only speaking of the goodness that comes after the fulfilment of the commandments. Because of this, [Rabbi Elazar] concludes, “here is the goodness and the blessing”: the goodness that precedes the fulfilment of the commandment, and the blessing that comes after the fulfilment of the commandment. That is the answer to question 1, why the author of the Midrash asked “What is [the meaning of], ‘if you are willing.’ ” It doesn’t refer to the initial goodness, which is given unconditionally, but only to the blessing that comes after the fulfilment of the commandment.

“If [you do] not [perform my will], here is the curse,” and to answer question 4, **there is no need** for the Midrash to say the parallel construction, **“here is the bad** and the curse.” That’s because the test, “If you do [or do not] perform My will” is only talking about what happens after the initial giving of goodness. It’s true that with regard to “If you perform My will,” Rabbi Elazar said, “here is the goodness and the blessing,” but the goodness was already given, and all that is at stake is whether the person gets to keep the goodness and receives an additional blessing. So for the case “If you do not perform My will,” as there has already been an initial gift of goodness, there is no need to say “the bad.”

Also, regarding question 2, **it is not difficult that it says, “But if you refuse and are defiant,** you will be devoured by the sword, as the mouth of the L-rd has spoken.” This doesn’t contradict anything previously discussed. That is why the author of our Midrash didn’t ask about that statement.

ולפי דרך זה נתרץ קושית העולם למה אמר הכתוב "את־הברכה אשר תשמעו", הנה לו לומר אם תשמעו דומיא ד"הקללה אם־לא תשמעו". ולפי דרכנו אתי שפיר, אני מקדים הברכה או הטוב דהיגיו טלית בית וכו' למען תוכלו לשמוע ולקיים המצות.

Question 5: **According to this way of understanding, we will solve everyone’s question: Why does Scripture says:** “See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: **the blessing, when you will hear** the commandments of the L-rd, your G-d, that I command you today.” **Shouldn’t it have said, “if you will hear,” to be parallel to “and the curse, if you will not hear** the commandments of the L-rd, your G-d”?

The answer is that **according to our way of understanding, it is fine.** G-d is saying: **I am advancing the blessing or the goodness, which is a prayer shawl, a house, etc., in order that you will be able to hear and to fulfill the commandments.** I.e., Scripture only speaks of “the blessing,” but the Midrash speaks of “the goodness and the blessing,” clarifying that G-d provides goodness before testing us to see if we follow His mitzvot. So the Scriptural reference to “the blessing” incorporates “the goodness.” As “the goodness” is given freely by G-d even before testing us, Scripture says “when you will hear.” That part is not conditional, so “when” is appropriate. In contrast, for the later, “if you will not hear,” that relates to whether we fulfill the commandments, which is conditional, so “if” is appropriate.

והטעם ושאר "ראה" בלשון יחיד ואחר כך "נתן לפניהם" בלשון רבים, יש לומר דאמרין בגמרא בזמן שהצבור שרוי בצער, אל יאמר אדם, אלך לביתי וכו' ושלום עליך נפשי. ואם עושה כן, אל יראה בנחמת צבור. ועל כן אמר הכתוב אתה היחיד בין שאני נותן לצבור ברכה בין קללה. "ראה" לעצמה להשתמר עמהם.

Question 6: Regarding the verse, “See, this day I set before you blessing and curse,” as to **the reason that it said the word “see” in the singular tense, and afterward said “I set before you” in the plural tense, [in order to answer] it can be said what is said in the Gemara. “When the community is immersed in suffering, a person may not say: I will go to my home and I**

will eat and drink, and peace be upon you, my soul.”⁴ “If he does so, let him not see the consolation of the community.”⁵ Therefore, Scripture said, “You are the individual between me giving the community a blessing or a curse. See for yourself to join them; don’t set yourself apart from the community.

וּלְהַבִּיין הַמְּשַׁל הַנ"ל דְּמָה עֲנָן פִּיּוֹף לְכָאן עִם הַסֵּפֶר יֵשׁ לֹאמֵר שֶׁכֶּתְבוּ חֲכָמֵי הַמּוֹסֵר שֶׁהַתָּרַב בְּנֵד הַחֲכָמִים הוּא תוֹעֵלֶת גְּדוֹל לְבָנֵי הַמְּדִינָה, וּבְנֵד הַכְּסִילִים הוּא קְלִקוּל וְהַפֶּסֶד גְּדוֹל. וְכֵן הַסֵּפֶר אָמְרוּ ו"ל לְמִימֵינוּ בְּה סָמָא דְחַי, לְמִשְׁמַאֲלִים בְּה סָמָא דְמוֹתָא. כִּי מִי שֵׁישׁ לוֹ דַּעַת עָבוּר הוּא מְקַשָּׁה עַל דְּבָרֵי רַז"ל וְנוֹטָה לְמִינּוּת וּמְפָרֵשׁ דְּבָרֵי תוֹרָה שְׁלֵא פִּהֲלָהָ, כְּמוֹ שֶׁעוֹשֶׂה הַכְּסִיל כְּשֵׁישׁ הַתָּרַב בְּיָדוֹ שֶׁהוּא חוֹבֵל וּמַזִּיק לְכָל הָעוֹלָם. וְלָכֵן יִרְדּוּ כְּרוּכִים הַסִּיּוֹף וְהַסֵּפֶר, כִּי מִי שֵׁישׁ לוֹ דַּעַת יִשְׁרָה הוּא עוֹסֵק בְּחֻקֵּי הַתָּרַב וְיִשְׁרָה וּמוֹעֵלֶת לוֹ וְלְכָל הָעוֹלָם וְלִהְיֶה חֵס וְשְׁלוֹם וְכו'.

Question 7 relates to the Midrash’s parable that “the sword and the [Torah] scroll descended intertwined from Heaven.”

To understand the above parable, i.e., what is the relationship of the sword with the scroll here, it can be said that the wise men of ethics wrote that the sword in the hand of the wise is a great benefit to the people of the nation, but in the hand of the foolish it [creates] ruin and great loss.

So too with the scroll, for the rabbis of blessed memory said, “For those who are right-handed [toward Torah, engaging in its study with sincerity], it is an elixir of life, but for those who are left-handed, it is a deadly poison.”⁶ For if one has knowledge, but he questions the words of the rabbis of blessed memory, and he is inclined toward heresy and explains the words of Torah in a manner not in accordance with the halacha—as the fool does when the sword is in his hand—then he wounds and harms the entire world. Therefore, the sword and the [Torah] scroll descended intertwined from Heaven, for one who has straightforward knowledge is engaged in wisdom in a straight manner, and it is beneficial for him and the entire world. The opposite is the case for the fool, G-d forbid.

וְעוֹד יֵשׁ לֹאמֵר טַעַם אַחַר לָמָּה לֹא אָמַר הָרִי הָרַע וְהַקְּלָהּ, שֶׁהַקְּלָהּ לֹא תוּכַל לְהִיּוֹת הַפֶּה הַבְּרָכָה. דָּרָךְ מְשַׁל "כְּרוּף אֶתָּה בְּעִיר" אָמְרוּ ו"ל בְּגִמְרָא שְׂיֵהָא בֵּיתָךְ סְמוּךְ לְבֵית הַכְּסָא וְחַד אָמַר סְמוּךְ לְבֵית הַכְּנֶסֶת. אִם כֵּן הִנֵּה נִרְאָה לֹאמֵר שֶׁאֲרוּר יִהְיֶה הַפֶּה הַבְּרָכָה בְּלִבָּד, וְנִה לֹא יִתְכּוֹן לֹאמֵר "אֲרוּר אֶתָּה בְּעִיר" שֶׁרָצָה לֹאמֵר שְׂיֵהָא בֵּיתָךְ רְחוּק מִבֵּית הַכְּנֶסֶת דָּאם כֵּן מַעֲט רַע הִנֵּה לוֹ, אֲלֵא "אֲרוּר אֶתָּה בְּעִיר" רַחֲמָנָא לְצַלּוֹן שְׁלֵא יִהְיֶה לָךְ בֵּית רָאוּי, ו"כְּרוּף אֶתָּה" תִּהְיֶה לָךְ [בֵּית] וְגַם תִּהְיֶה סְמוּךְ לְבֵית הַכְּנֶסֶת, דְּלַעוֹלָם מִדָּה טוֹבָה מְרוֹבָה מִמִּדַּת פְּרַעְנוּת הָרִי אִם עֲשִׂיתֶם רְצוֹנֵי הָרִי הַטּוֹב וְהַבְּרָכָה. וְעַיִן רִישׁ פְּרָשְׁת עֲקֵב טַעַם אַחַר לָמָּה פְּתַח בְּלִשׁוֹן יְחִיד וּמְסִיִּים בְּלִשׁוֹן רַבִּים.

Returning to question 4, with another answer: It can also be said that there’s another reason why it did not say, “See, here is the bad and the curse.” The curse can’t be the opposite of the blessing; the opposite of a blessing would be its absence.

⁴ Ta’anit 11a.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Shabbat 88b, quoting Rava.

By way of a parable on the verse, **“Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the country,”**⁷ [the rabbis] of blessed memory said in the Gemara, that it means that **your house should be adjacent to an outhouse, and one said that it should be adjacent to a synagogue.**⁸ If so, it would appear to say that **“cursed” will be the opposite of “blessed” alone, i.e., not near an outhouse or a synagogue. It’s not possible to say “cursed are you in the city,”**⁹ for if so, that would mean that **your house would be distant from the outhouse or synagogue, and if so, that would only be slightly bad.** I.e., it wouldn’t qualify as a curse.

Rather, a curse must mean something that goes beyond the opposite of a blessing. For example, **“cursed are you in the city,” G-d forbid, means that you don’t have a suitable house.** With thus understanding, and **“blessed shall you be” means that you will not only have a house, but you will also be adjacent to the outhouse or synagogue. For a measure of good is always greater than a measure of retribution,**¹⁰ if you do My will, here is the good and the blessing.

See the beginning of parashat Ekev, essay 1, another reason why it opens with the singular tense and concludes with the plural tense.

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⁷ Deut. 28:3.

⁸ Bava Metzia 107a.

⁹ Deut. 28:16.

¹⁰ Sotah 11a; Sanhedrin 100b; Yoma 76a.