

“Que Sera, Sera!” v. “Do the right thing!”

Parashat Behukkotai

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Back in the 1950's and 1960's, there was a very widely known and idolized singer and movie star who was immensely popular. Blond, upbeat and upright, her name was Doris Day, and she was the symbol of a more innocent age than our own.

In 1956, Doris Day sang a song in a movie that became an instant hit. The song became so popular that it later became the theme song of her television show, which ran from 1968 to 1973. The song was “*Que sera, sera*: Whatever will be, will be.” It begins like this:

**When I was just a little girl
I asked my mother, what will I be
Will I be pretty, will I be rich
Here's what she said to me.**

**Que Sera, Sera,
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours, to see
Que Sera, Sera
What will be, will be.**

**When I was young, I fell in love
I asked my sweetheart what lies ahead
Will we have rainbows, day after day
Here's what my sweetheart said.**

**Que Sera, Sera,
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours, to see
Que Sera, Sera
What will be, will be.**



The popularity of the song far out-stripped that of the movie in which it first appeared, or the TV show in which it was sung, week after week, year after year.

It's a sweet song with a simple message. It reminds us to be accepting of the vicissitudes, or the ups and downs, of life. When it comes to them, the song seems to say, we don't have a lot of influence. Certain things are just not in our control, and we shouldn't sweat it. We get a very different image, from a very different perspective, from today's Torah reading.

In some parts of the Torah, like the Book of Genesis or the early part of the Book of Exodus, the focus seems to be on the past: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth," or "On the 15th day of the month of Nissan, the people began to leave Egypt," etc., etc. In these passages, the Torah seems to be focused on telling us the story of where we came from, how we got to where we are today.

But sometimes, the focus is on the *future*. Rather than describing the *past*, there's an effort to describe the *future* in such a way as to influence our behavior in the *present*.

The core of today's *parashah* is a great example of that. The text puts before us two possibilities: either we, the Jewish People, will do the right thing, and wonderful things will happen to us; or we will do the wrong thing, and horrible things will happen to us.

It's hard to think of a text that is more different from "*Que sera, sera*." The message of our text is very clear: if you want to avoid really bad things happening to you, obey God, do the right thing, fulfill the *mitzvot*. The message here is not about acceptance; it's about doing the right thing and altering your future.

That's what this *parashah* is all about: if you obey, blessings will follow. And if you don't, they won't. Instead, curses—horrible curses—will overwhelm you.

This presents us with two big challenges. The first is that, well, as we all know, righteousness is great, but it doesn't always result in wonderful consequences; and our failure to behave properly doesn't always result in horrible things (in other words, there are false positives and false negatives). Second, there's something unseemly about coupling our fate with our behavior: shouldn't we seek to do the right thing simply because it's the right thing to do? Why do we need what amounts to a bribe to behave properly – especially if those promises don't always come true?

Let me address both of those concerns. Regarding the first, the answer is obvious. Today's Torah reading isn't a statement about empirical reality, or the world as it *is*, but of the world as our ancestors *wanted* it to be. In this respect, they lived in the same world that we do. They knew just as well as we do that righteousness is not always rewarded and bad behavior is not always punished—and there are plenty of other texts that make that point. Just because they lived in the Biblical age, which may seem like a magical wonderland to us, they didn't necessarily understand the relationship between cause and effect differently from us. They knew that the righteous sometimes suffer and the no-goodniks of the world sometimes prosper. That didn't stop them from expressing, as the Torah does in this text, their vision of the world as it ought to be. It's a poetic idealization. They knew that God doesn't always act in history the way they wished God would – but that didn't stop them from hoping and praying for just that. They didn't get hung up, and we mustn't get hung up on the fact that the association is hardly 100%.

Regarding the coupling of behavior and consequences, I think the answer is that, even if the association isn't perfect, we are motivated by the suggestion that there is a connection. For that is the kind of people we are. People are much more likely to behave better when they think that there might be something in it for them, and they're more likely to refrain from bad behavior if they think that they might be caught and punished – even if, on some level, they know that the chances are a lot less than 100% that those outcomes will occur.

I was recently corresponding with a former member of our congregation about today's *parashah*. I told her that, whether we are proud of it or not, we should acknowledge that we behave differently when a police officer is around. She told me that, indeed, people *do* behave differently in the presence of a police officer.

She told me that, by coincidence, she had just had an incredible experience: She took part in a "Citizen's Police Academy," in which she, and the other members of the class learned how their local police force operates, and at the end of the course, she got to ride around all night with a police officer. It was, she said, an extraordinary experience. She felt like she was travelling around with royalty. People were deferential, they were apologetic, they were insisting that they meant well, and they threw themselves on the police officer's mercy.

Now, that wasn't the case with all of the people they encountered. There was one person, for example, who was out of control. But that was how most people behaved.

My guess is that that is how most people here today behave. When we get to a long, slow red light at a lonely intersection someplace, and we're tempted to drive through it, my guess is that some of us might do that, but most of us won't, not because we think it's such a virtuous thing to do—in fact, we probably think that the behavior is morally neutral, and that we're suckers for not driving through—but because maybe, just maybe, there's a police car waiting around the bend to greet us.

So when we read this week's portion, we shouldn't feel as though we are so superior to our ancestors: in some ways, we're just like them.

How many of us have given up rich deserts, or other foods that nutritionists tell us are no good for us? We do this because some very well-meaning people tell us that if we go ahead and eat those foods, bad things will happen to us. On the other hand, if we refrain from eating them, we'll be healthy.

Now, we all know that that isn't always the case. There was a story on WBUR's "Here And Now" the other day about a 99 year-old-man. He's a retired nutritionist. A retired nutritionist, and he eats an egg every morning! Not just a bland egg-white omelet, but a whole egg, including the cholesterol-rich egg yolk. Every day. And he's 99.

Most of us won't eat a whole egg every day – even though we know about this 99-year old nutritionist who does.

I don't mean to minimize the divide between us and those who read today's Torah portion as empirical truth. Philosophically and theologically, we *do* live in a different world. But we, like they, can be motivated by promises and threats.

What about those false positives, and those false negatives? What are we to do about them?

Ultimately we can always look at the last stanza of that song, "Que Sera, Sera":

**Now I have children of my own
They ask their mother, what will I be
Will I be handsome, will I be rich
I tell them tenderly.**

**Que Sera, Sera,
Whatever will be, will be
The future's not ours, to see
Que Sera, Sera
What will be, will be.**

Let's try not to get too invested in our lives turning out in one and only one particular way. In fact, if we have an idea that our lives will turn out in one particular way, we'll probably be wrong. Whether it's our health, or our home life, or our jobs, ... whatever!

Let's try to do the right thing for one simple reason: because it is the right thing to do. And let's do our best to accept what life has to offer.

AMEN.