

PARASHAT KI TAVO

Deuteronomy 26:1–29:8

Parashat Ki Tavo addresses the time when the Israelites will settle in the Land of Israel. Moses instructs them to place in a basket the first fruits they have harvested and present them, together with a prayer, to the priest at the sanctuary. Their prayer is to be a formula recalling they were slaves in Egypt, liberated by God, and given the land whose first fruits they now enjoy. They are also to set aside a tenth part of their yield for the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow, and they are to keep all the commandments given to them. In this way they will be a treasured people to God. Moses and the elders tell them, when they have settled in the land, to write the commandments on large plastered stones and set them up on Mount Ebal, where they are also to build an altar to God. Then representatives of the tribes of Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin are to stand on Mount Gerizim to hear the blessing describing the good times that will come as a result of observing God's commandments. Facing them on Mount Ebal, representatives from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali are to stand to hear the curse resulting from disobeying the commandments. God promises the Israelites blessings of plenty, security, and peace if they observe faithfully the teachings of Torah. Curses of destruction, agony, want, and exile will befall them if they spurn the teachings of Torah. "Observe faithfully all the terms of this covenant," Moses warns, "that you may succeed in all that you undertake."

OUR TARGUM

• 1 •

Moses instructs the people, when they enter the Land of Israel and complete their harvest, to take their first fruits in a basket for an offering at the sanctuary. When the priest places the basket on the altar, the people are to declare: "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there. . . . The Egyptians dealt harshly with us. . . . We cried to *Adonai*. . . . *Adonai* heard our plea. . . . *Adonai* freed us from Egypt. . . . and gave us this land. . . . Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which You, *Adonai*, have given me."

In the third year, after setting aside a tenth of the yield for the Levite, the stranger, the father-

less, and the widow, the Israelites are commanded to declare: "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. . . . Look down from Your holy abode, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the soil You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You swore to our ancestors."

Moses reminds the people they are commanded to observe God's commandments faithfully. He tells them they are God's treasured people and, because of their faithfulness, God "will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations. . . . and you shall be, as God promised, a holy people to *Adonai* your God."



·2·

Moses provides instruction for them after they have crossed the Jordan. They are to set up large stones on Mount Ebal, plaster them over, and write upon them all the commandments of the Torah. In addition, they are to build an altar to God of uncut stones for offerings.

Moses describes a special ceremony where representatives from the tribes of Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin will stand on Mount Gerizim while words of blessing are spoken. Representatives from the tribes of Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali will stand on Mount Ebal while the curse is spoken. The ceremony is to dramatize to the Israelites the critical importance of living according to the laws of Torah.

Among the curses mentioned are those directed at Israelites who make idols; insult their parents; move a neighbor's landmark; mislead a blind person; subvert the rights of the stranger, the fatherless, or the widow; practice improper sexual relations; hurt another in secret; accept a bribe; or fail to live according to the terms of the Torah.

Ignoring God's commandments, Moses says, will cause calamity, panic, and misfortune. Enemies will bring destruction. God will strike Israel with sickness, scorching heat, and drought. "The skies above you shall be copper and the earth

under you iron . . . you will be wiped out." Furthermore, you will be driven into exile; others will harvest your fields; nothing you plant will succeed. "The cricket shall take over all the trees and produce of your land." Plagues and chronic diseases will afflict you. "You shall find no peace. . . . The life you face shall be precarious; you shall be in terror, night and day, with no assurance of survival."

Conversely, abundant blessings are promised to the people if they are faithful to the laws of the Torah. They will be blessed with victory over their enemies and plenty in their harvests and all their undertakings. "*Adonai* will make you the head, not the tail; you will always be at the top and never at the bottom . . . if you do not deviate to the right or to the left from any of the commandments that I enjoin upon you. . . ." Your children will be blessed, all your property will prosper, so will your basket of charity, all your comings and goings.

Because of your faithfulness to the commandments, Moses tells the people, "*Adonai* will open for you a bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land in season and to bless all your undertakings. You will be creditor to many nations, but debtor to none." These are the terms of the covenant Moses concludes with the Israelites.

THEMES

Parashat Ki Tavo contains two important themes:

1. Reliving history.
2. Facing the consequences of our actions.

PEREK ALEF: *The Drama and Meaning of Reliving History*

In these speeches to the Israelites in the desert, Moses focuses on the future when the people have already conquered the Land of Israel and are enjoying its harvests. At that time, he tells them, they are to take "every first fruit of the soil . . . put it in a basket and go to the place where God's name will be established." Once at the sanctuary, they will present the basket to a priest,

saying: "I acknowledge this day before *Adonai* our God that I have entered the land that *Adonai* swore to our ancestors to give us."

As the priest takes the basket, the Israelites are to continue the ritual drama with the following declaration: *Arami oved avi*. . . . "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us.

We cried to *Adonai*, the God of our ancestors, and *Adonai* heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. *Adonai* freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. God brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil that You, O *Adonai*, have given me.”

One can easily imagine participating in such a ritual: filling the basket with first fruits, presenting it at the sanctuary, and reciting the declaration. But what is the purpose of this ceremony?

Several commentators point out that the ritual of declaration constitutes one of the only prayers found in the entire Torah. Its meaning, however, is a matter of dispute.



Rashi

Some interpreters, including the author of the *Sifre* and Rashi, insist that the translation of *Arami oved avi* is “an Aramean sought to destroy my father,” meaning that Laban, for whom Jacob worked twenty years, intended to destroy him. This interpretation, as we shall see, is followed by those who authored the first Pesach *haggadot*.

Rashi’s grandson argues that the Aramean mentioned is not Laban but Abraham, who was born and raised in Aram-naharaim.



Ibn Ezra

Others, following Abraham ibn Ezra, point out that it makes no sense to identify Laban or Abraham as the Aramean. Instead, ibn Ezra claims Moses is referring to Jacob, whose mother had come from Aram-naharaim, who was persecuted there by Laban, and who fled from the oppression of famine into Egypt, where Joseph was in power and could assure the survival of Jacob’s family.

Given the variety of interpretations of the words

Arami oved avi, the ritual prayer could mean: “My father was a fugitive (wandering or persecuted) Aramean,” referring to Abraham or Jacob. Or the text could mean: “An Aramean sought to destroy my father.” In other words, Laban schemed to destroy Jacob and his family. Most modern biblical scholars agree that the identification of either Abraham or Jacob as the “fugitive” Aramean is correct.

The *Mishnah* describes the colorful celebration of offering the first fruits at the Temple in Jerusalem. In each town throughout the Land of Israel, prayer groups would gather. They would celebrate during the evening; in the morning they would commence their pilgrimage to Jerusalem, led by a flute player, followed by an ox with horns overlaid with gold and a wreath of olive leaves on its head. When they reached Jerusalem, they sent messengers to the Temple and prepared their first fruits for offering. As they marched through the city, the people of Jerusalem would greet them, saying: “Welcome to Jerusalem.” When they reached the Temple, the Levites would break into song.

Inside the Temple, holding their baskets, they would recite: “I acknowledge this day. . . . My father was a fugitive Aramean. . . . Wherefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil that You, *Adonai*, have given me.” The long walk up to Jerusalem, the parade through the streets, the musical entrance into the Temple, and the drama of reciting their declaration with basket in hand must have made a powerful impression and filled them with memories for a lifetime. (*Bikkurim* 3)

Is this what Moses had in mind when he defined the ritual drama of the first-fruits offering? Did he envision a musical parade? Why was a fixed formula of declaration put into the mouth of the worshiper? Why wasn’t the prayer a spontaneous declaration or a prayer of thanks to God for the abundant fruits of the harvest? Why was the prayer about the past, about suffering, misery, and oppression?

Moses Maimonides addresses such questions in his *Guide for the Perplexed*. (3:39) Offering the first fruits of the harvest, he says, is a way people “accustom themselves to being generous” and a means of “limiting the human appetite for more consumption, not only of food, but of property.”

Maimonides views the ritual drama as an antidote to materialism and overindulgence. "People who amass fortunes and live in comfort," he observes, "often fall victim to self-centered excesses and arrogance. They tend to abandon ethical considerations because of increasingly selfish concerns." Bringing a harvest basket of first fruits and reciting the prayer "promotes humility."



Rambam (Maimonides)

Maimonides also points out that "it is essential . . . to recall previous experiences of suffering and distress in times of ease." Such recollections remind us that human experience is a mixture of successes and failures, of joys and disappointments. History, like the life of a human being, is complex and often frustrating. People often become cynical and abandon their hopes and dreams.

The triumph of freedom over oppression often evolves slowly through pain, setbacks, and strong determination. Jacob suffers, his children endure hunger and homelessness, his grandchildren and subsequent generations are oppressed, tortured, and enslaved in Egypt. Without faith in God's liberating power, the Israelites would not have achieved freedom. It sustained them through the darkest hours. In offering the first fruits with a declaration recalling their stormy history, the people underscore the importance of taking nothing for granted. This ritual, concludes Maimonides, "helps us keep God's miracles fresh in memory and perpetuate faith."

RASHBAM

For Rashbam the ritual is much more than a means of recalling the past and the Jewish people's reliance upon God's miracles. Rashbam points out that each participant, standing inside the Temple with the basket of first fruits, becomes a part of a significant drama—a highly personal

confession. Identifying with Abraham, the worshiper declares: "My father [Abraham] was a wandering Aramean." By this he means to say that "my parent, not someone else's but *mine*, was lost, and *my* relatives suffered in Egypt, were liberated, and fought to conquer the Land of Israel. They were victorious and I hold this basket of fruits because of God's help."

Rashbam believes that for the pilgrim this ritual is a life-transforming moment of identification with one's ancestors and with the truth that the fruits in the basket and the liberation from Egypt are not the accomplishments of human beings alone. It is God's will that transforms seed into fruits; it is God's will that frees the captive. Rashbam sees each participant in the Temple ritual arriving at this conclusion: "My parents came from a strange land where they were slaves to this good and prosperous land. Now, in gratitude, I am bringing the first fruits of the land to the Temple because I realize that this bounty is not of my doing, but I enjoy it through God's mercy." (Comments on Deuteronomy 26: 3–11)

Words count

Rabbi Aharon Halevi argues that the Israelites are commanded to recite the prayer "My father was a fugitive Aramean. . . . Adonai freed us from Egypt. . . . Wherefore I now bring the first fruits . . ." because "the mind and imagination of people are deeply impressed by what they say." This prayer "arouses the heart, prompting the minds of those who say it to believe that all they enjoy came to them from the God of the universe." (Sefer ha-Hinuch 606)

Against conceit

Rabbi Jacob J. Weinstein comments: "Each Israelite was religiously commanded to recall in the time of prosperity that his [her] father was a wandering Aramean, a hobo, a sojourner, a rootless and homeless refugee. The intention of this admonition was to curb the conceit of the self-made person. He [she] was reminded that it required more than industry, skill, ambition, and contriving to rise from poverty to affluence."

It required also the help of God. . . . True piety, philosopher Santayana said, is a sense of reverence for the sources of our being.” (The Place of Understanding, pp. 136–138)

Modern philosopher Martin Buber comments that this declaration of the Israelite at the sanctuary is unique because it is a very personal, individual expression. Instead of saying, “*Our fathers were fugitive Arameans,*” one says, “*My father. . . .*” What we have here, says Buber, is a “merging of the people and the individual into one.” The drama of the worship identifies the individual with Israel’s history. It roots him in the past by allowing him to make the claim that he is a direct descendant (*my father. . . .*) of those who came out of Egyptian slavery and forty years of desert wandering into the Land of Israel.

This identification is not casual. It deliberately links Jews to their historical experience and to the responsibilities of carrying out the commandments. Each year, explains Buber, the worshiper comes to the sanctuary and, in effect, says: “I as an individual feel and profess myself as one who has just come into the land, and, every time I offer its first fruits, I acknowledge who I am and renew my identity.” (*Israel and Palestine*, Farrar, Strauss and Young, New York, 1952, pp. 3–5)

Buber’s interpretation of the pilgrim’s declaration as a means of identity with one’s history may be compared to a similar declaration in the Pesach *haggadah*. After completing the narration of the liberation from bondage, which begins with the words “In the beginning our ancestors were idol worshipers” and includes a rabbinic commentary on the statement “My father was a fugitive Aramean,” each person at the seder says: “In every generation a person is to see himself as if he were going out of Egypt. . . .” The drama of the seder, like the drama of presenting the basket of first fruits, bonds the individual to the Jewish people. Such rituals banish loneliness by placing us in the company of others who are celebrating shared ethical aspirations, heroes and heroines, tragedies and triumphs. Participating in the seder transports the individual back “home” to ancient ties of faith and tradition.

What about those who are not born into the

people, whose past is non-Jewish but who convert to Judaism? Is it appropriate for converts to say *Arami oved avi*, “My father was a fugitive Aramean”?

According to the *Mishnah*, converts may bring their baskets of first fruits to the sanctuary, but they are forbidden to recite the prayer. The prayer includes statements that, for converts, are untrue: “I acknowledge this day before *Adonai* our God that I have entered the land which *Adonai* swore to our ancestors to give us,” and “My father was a fugitive Aramean.” Rather than recite a ritual prayer that is technically untrue, as one’s birth parents were not Jews, the convert may bring the basket without saying the ancient prayer. From the *Mishnah*’s point of view, the ritual is not to be trivialized by inviting people to falsify their pasts. (*Bikkurim* 1:4)

The *Mishnah*’s view, however, is challenged by other authorities. Rabbi Judah claims that converts are not only permitted to say the words “My father was a fugitive Aramean,” but they are also encouraged to recite all prayers that include the phrase “Our God and God of our ancestors, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob.” Rabbi Judah bases his view on the belief that Abraham was also a convert, and God promised to make him “father of a multitude of peoples.” The promise, he argues, legitimately makes Abraham the “father” of all non-Jews who choose to become Jews, making it appropriate for them to address Abraham as their parent. (Jerusalem Talmud, *Bikkurim* 1:4)

In the eleventh century, Moses Maimonides signaled his agreement with Rabbi Judah. He ruled that it was permissible for converts to recite the prayers of the first fruits. His view became the acceptable practice of the Jewish community. Interestingly, this is the only case where Maimonides challenges the *Mishnah*. (*Mishneh Torah, Bikkurim* 4:3)

Later, a famous convert by the name of Obadiah wrote to Maimonides asking for a clarification of his ruling. “Should a convert,” he asked, “recite prayers with the words ‘Our God and God of our ancestors,’ or ‘who has commanded us,’ or ‘who has chosen us,’ or ‘who has brought us out of Egypt . . .?’”

Referring to Obadiah as “our teacher and mas-

ter . . . the scholar and understanding one, the righteous convert,” Maimonides answered: “You should recite all the prayers just as they are formulated in the liturgy. Change nothing! But, just as every born-Jew prays and recites benedictions, so you should do so whether in private or public as a leader of the congregation. . . . The reason for this is that Abraham our father taught all humanity. . . . Consequently, everyone who accepts Judaism until the end of all generations . . . is a descendant of Abraham. . . . There is absolutely no difference whatsoever between us and between you.” (Jacob S. Minkin, *The World of Moses Maimonides*, Thomas Yoseloff, New York, 1957, pp. 375–376)



Leibowitz

Commenting on Maimonides' letter, modern interpreter Nehama Leibowitz concludes that “the letter utterly repudiates any racial theory that would evaluate human character in terms of ethnic origins. Maimonides well and truly bases human merit in the eyes of God upon our conduct and deeds.”



Peli

Pinchas Peli agrees but widens the point of view. “By joining the Jewish religion, the convert joins the Jewish people and its history. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to whom the land was promised, are also ancestors of the convert. [One] can rightly say, therefore, the full text of the first-fruits offering.” (*Torah Today*, B'nai B'rith Books, Washington, D.C., 1987, pp. 227–228)

The ritual drama of the first-fruits offering was meant to express gratitude to God for liberation from bondage, for the Land of Israel, and for the bounty of the harvest. The ritual, however, is more than words of prayerful thanksgiving. The power of the experience on the individual was enormous. In recalling Abraham's struggle and the suffering of the Israelites, the worshiper

made Israelite history his or her own. The ceremony, for a born-Jew or a convert, confirmed the bond of the individual to the people of Israel. Through this ceremony one became a proud participant in Judaism's challenges and future.

PEREK BET: *Blessings and Curses; Who Is Responsible for Them? Are They Just?*

In these speeches by Moses to the Israelites, we find a powerful idea—an idea that has occurred earlier in the Torah. Some would argue that it is the greatest challenge put before the Israelites. They are told that if they faithfully observe the mitzvot, or the “commandments,” they will be blessed. If they do not practice the mitzvot, they will be cursed. The choice is theirs.

This proposition of blessings and curses is also presented in Leviticus, *Parashat Behar-Bechukotai*. (See *A Torah Commentary for Our Times*, Volume II.) Now the Torah returns to it. This time, however, it is presented partially in the form of a ritual formula to be pronounced by tribal leaders and then proclaimed by the Levites to the people.

The ritual contains twelve curses, each beginning with the words “Cursed be the one who.” The curses condemn (1) creating images; (2) insulting parents; (3) moving a landmark; (4) misleading a blind person; (5) subverting the rights of the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow; (6) having sexual relations with one's father's wife; (7) having sexual relations with animals; (8) having incestuous relations; (9) having sexual relations with one's mother-in-law; (10) secretly harming a neighbor; (11) accepting a bribe; and (12) failing to uphold the laws of Torah.

Conversely, Moses assures the people that if they observe faithfully all the commandments of Torah, they will enjoy four special blessings, each beginning with the words “Blessed shall you be.” The blessings shall come upon the people (1) in their cities and in the country; (2) in the numbers of their children, herds, and produce; (3) in their basket and kneading bowl; and (4) in their comings and goings.

After articulating these curses and blessings, Moses adds a list of additional rewards if the Israelites observe all the commandments God has given them. These include victory over their enemies, productivity of their herds and crops, abundant prosperity, and leadership among all the nations.

Moses adds, if the people fail to practice the mitzvot, they will be punished with such catastrophes as calamity, frustration in all that they undertake, sickness, blight, skies that turn to copper and earth that turns to iron, destruction by their enemies, madness, blindness, dissolving of family ties, exile, ruthless rule by strangers, terrible famine, and a return to Egyptian slavery and oppression.

The Torah concludes these curses and blessings, these rewards and punishments, with the statement: "These are the terms of the covenant that *Adonai* commanded Moses to conclude with the Israelites. . . ."

One ponders these blessings and curses and asks: What did Moses think? Did he really believe that refusal to follow the commandments would bring about such frightful punishments? Or did he make the result of following the commandments so pleasant and the consequence of deliberate or careless rejection so calamitous because he believed that only "fear of God" would bring compliance? In our modern society, is there anything to be learned from this list of curses and blessings?

Knowledge brings responsibility

Rabbi Simeon ben Halafta taught that if one becomes knowledgeable of Torah and its commandments but then does not fulfill them, the punishment will be more severe.

Other rabbis teach that benefits, even peace, come into the world on account of the merits of those who live according to the commandments.
(Deuteronomy Rabbah 7:4,7)

Several early rabbinic interpreters suggest that God actually rewards those who obey the mitzvot of the Torah. Rabbi Joshua of Siknin, in the name of Rabbi Levi, teaches that as a reward

God hears the prayer of those who carry out the commandments. Others suggest that the reward is success in business. Rabbi Jonathan holds that performing the mitzvot leads to the blessing of having children, the guarantee of rain in its season, and life after death (resurrection). Rabbi Abba ben Kahana speaks for many of the early rabbinic commentators when he declares: "If the people of Israel live by the laws of Torah, God will reward them in the world to come—in the life after death."

The idea of being rewarded in the world to come is a recognition of the harsh realities of human existence. The world we inhabit is imperfect. As biblical authors Job and *Kohelet* note, good people suffer, as well as evil ones. Those who live piously and generously often endure pain with no clear benefits or protection for their loyalty to God. In response to the difficult question of why some good people suffer and some evildoers seem to escape suffering, many rabbinic commentators suggest that God's blessings and curses await us in the world to come—in heaven. It is there we will know the true justice of God.

From the rabbinic interpreters' point of view, that does not mean that human beings have no role in determining their fate in the world to come. On the contrary, the choices we make in life influence God's final decree. The intention of the Torah's list of blessings and curses is to urge us to choose lives filled with mitzvah deeds so we will be assured of an eternity of blessing. (*Deuteronomy Rabbah* 7:1-9)

Rashi offers a significant correction of this early rabbinic position. Noting the double emphasis of the Torah's warning: "If you will listen, really listen [to the commandments] . . ." he explains that the intention is educational. The Torah means to help people understand that the road to performing the commandments may be difficult, especially in the beginning. Therefore, the people are promised blessings so they will be encouraged to take the first steps to carry them out. Once they are on the way to fulfilling the commandments and have discovered how pleasant it is to live by them, they will more easily embrace God's law. (Comment on Exodus 19:5)

Rashi's point seems to agree with that of Si-

meon ben Azzai: "Be as quick to obey a minor mitzvah as a major one and flee from transgression, for one mitzvah performed leads to another, and one transgression leads to another. Indeed, the reward of one mitzvah is another mitzvah, and the punishment of one transgression is another transgression." (*Avot* 4:2) Rashi, like ben Azzai, sees the list of blessings and curses as a pedagogic device, a means of urging the people to comply with the commandments of Torah.

Moses Maimonides agrees but points out that the Torah specifically promises relief from serious disabilities for those who carry out the commandments because "it is impossible for people to perform the service of God when they are sick, hungry, thirsty, or in trouble." The reward of good health enables people to move toward the great purpose of Torah, "the attainment of perfection of knowledge and becoming worthy to enter the world to come." The rewards are not simply incentives. They bring major benefits, allowing frail human beings the strength of good health and a long life in which to achieve knowledge and earn an entrance into heaven. (*Mishneh Torah, Teshuvah* 9).

Is it appropriate, however, to argue that rewards and blessings are guaranteed to those who observe the mitzvot and that punishment and curses are destined to fall upon those who refuse to follow the commandments of Torah? As we have seen, this appears to be the intent of the Torah text and many of its most important interpreters.

Contemporary Jewish philosopher Rabbi David Hartman explains Maimonides' view with a story about his father, a traditional Jew. Each year the family built a beautiful *sukah*, inviting friends to share the joy of the festival. One year, writes Hartman, "a sudden rainstorm forced our family to leave the *sukah*," and "I cannot forget my father's explanation to his children as we left the *sukah*." He told us, "God must be displeased tonight with the community of Israel. He does not welcome us into His 'canopy of peace.'" The rain, continues Hartman, "was seen as a sign of divine anger and rejection."

Hartman disagrees with his father's explanation that God deliberately sends curses and blessings upon human beings as a result of their

observance or nonobservance of the commandments. As an alternative, he argues that the world in which we live is imperfect. Human beings make mistakes; they begin with a motive to help and sometimes end up hurting one another. They struggle to bring trust, justice, mercy, and love into human relationships but often fail. Best intentions crash into misunderstandings. Blessings turn to curses and plunge us into confusion.

That is reality, says Hartman. Jewish tradition teaches us to "be sober and careful when performing a mitzvah. God," he asserts, "will give you the protection needed to perform mitzvot, but belief in God's protection should not make you oblivious to real dangers. You must combine your trust in God's protective love with a healthy respect for reality," for a recognition that our best intentions sometimes are twisted into curses.

Does that mean we should not expect rewards for carrying out the mitzvot? Not so, says Hartman, believing that such expectations are critical. "To give up anticipation of reward in this world for mitzvot could destroy the vitality of the sense of personal relationship with God that animates covenantal religious life. . . . If we are taught to expect rewards for mitzvot also in this world, then sometimes we may be disappointed, but we will also attach greater significance to the joyful moments in our lives by seeing them as signs of divine approval." (*A Living Covenant*, pp. 184–194)

Rabbi Hartman's position is that the curses and blessings mentioned in our Torah portion are useful because they add urgency to our relationship with God. They help define the consequences of our actions although there are times when such consequences are beyond our understanding. Most of the time, however, the curses function as warning signs. They signal what we should not do. On the other hand, the blessings we enjoy remind us that God is pleased with our partnership.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel approaches the subject of our Torah portion from a very different point of view. The purpose of the Torah, he cautions, "is not to substitute for but to extend our understanding." It is meant "to ex-

tend the horizon of our conscience and to impart to us a sense of the divine partnership in our dealings with good and evil and in our wrestling with life's enigmas. Clearly one of these serious questions is: What does God want of me?"

Heschel answers that God wants our mitzvah deeds. "It is in *deeds* that human beings become aware of what life really is, of their power to harm and to hurt, to wreck and to ruin; of their ability to derive joy and to bestow it upon others; to relieve and to increase their own and other people's tensions. . . . The deed is the test, the trial, and the risk. What we perform may seem slight, but the aftermath is immense. An individual's misdeed can be the beginning of a nation's disaster. The sun goes down, but the deeds go on. . . ."

For Heschel, deeds have serious, sometimes unknown, and long-range consequences. They possess enormous power to bring blessings or curses, rewards or punishment, fulfillments or despair. But they are also the means through which human beings celebrate or reject their partnership with God. "With a sacred deed goes more than a stir of the heart. In a sacred deed, we echo God's suppressed chant . . . we intone God's unfinished song. God depends upon us, awaits our deeds."

So, says Heschel, does the future of our planet and species. "We stand on a razor's edge. It is so easy to hurt, to destroy, to insult, to kill . . . life." For that reason we must regard ourselves as "half-guilty and half-meritorious." If we perform one good deed, we move the scale toward blessing. One transgression and we move the scale into the realm of curses. "Not only the individual but the whole world is in balance. One deed of an individual may decide the fate of the world."

Heschel places the burden for rewards and punishments, blessings and curses, upon each individual. The long list of blessings and curses mentioned in the Torah is not there as a warning, as an incentive to action, or as a promise of eternal joy in heaven. The blessings and curses, says Heschel, define the harsh consequences of choices made by human beings who hold in their hands not only the fate of their personal lives

but also the fate of the world. Through their mitzvah choices, human beings either banish God's Presence from their midst or become sacred instruments through which God's power for justice, goodness, mercy, and love enters and transforms the world. (*God in Search of Man*, chaps. 28, 34)

Moses places before the ancient Israelites a covenant with consequences. They have choices to make. By following the mitzvot, they can assure themselves of blessings; by rejecting them, they will reap a whirlwind of destruction. Their future does not depend upon blind fate. It depends upon them, upon their choices. We might say that God waits for their answer. Today, we might add, God waits for our answer.

QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. Lawrence A. Hoffman, a modern scholar on ritual, explains that prayer is a form of art through which individuals bring order, integrity, hope, and vision into their lives. "When worship works, we are artists in the finest sense of affirming wholeness through the power of our traditional images of time, space, and history." (*The Art of Public Prayer*, Pastoral Press, Washington, D.C., 1988, pp. 148–151) Review the various interpretations of the pilgrim's prayer. How does the prayer fulfill Hoffman's definition of ritual?
2. In her book, *Choosing Judaism* (UAHC Press, New York, 1981), Lydia Kukoff, a convert to Judaism, offers this advice to those entering Jewish life: "Sometimes as I sit in our decorated *sukah*, or as I march around the synagogue on Simchat Torah carrying a Torah scroll, I think back to the time when I walked into those services 'cold.' I am so glad I didn't give up. Don't you give up either. Today it is all new to you. For now, just try to participate as much as you can. In time, you will find that it all belongs to you. You won't get there in a year, but twelve months later you'll be further along, and certainly

even further with each succeeding year.” (p. 66) Compare this advice to that offered by Maimonides to the convert Obadiah.

3. Review the interpretations of blessings and curses for observance or nonobservance of the commandments. Are there contemporary consequences (blessings and curses) for observance or nonobservance of the ethical mitzvot of Torah?
4. Several commentators suggest that the enjoyment and personal satisfaction derived from

doing a mitzvah leads to the doing of other mitzvot. As examples, the joy and love shared while observing Shabbat may inspire us to acts of charity, and the delight of celebrating a Pesach seder may lead to working for the liberation of people still oppressed. What are some other benefits (blessings) that may be derived from observing the mitzvot? What impact can the observance of ritual commandments have upon observance of ethical commandments?