

Parshat Ki Tavo 5776

“If we never experience the chill of a dark winter, it is very unlikely that we will ever cherish the warmth of a bright summer’s day. Nothing stimulates our appetite for the simple joys of life more than the starvation caused by sadness or desperation. In order to complete our amazing life journey successfully, it is vital that we turn each and every dark tear into a pearl of wisdom, and find the blessing in every curse.” — Anthon St. Maarten

As we approach Rosh Hashana our hopes and prayers are that we should have a year ahead full of blessings. So why do we have a Sedra so close to Rosh Hashana so full of doom and gloom, with predictions about the calamities that await the Jewish people should they stray from the path of the Torah.

“But it shall come to pass, if you do not obey the voice of Hashem, do not observe and carry out all his commandments and statutes that I command you today, then all of these curses shall come upon you and overtake you.” Devarim (28:15) Parashat Ki Tavo is well known for its extensive listing of the rewards promised to the Israelites should they act according to Hashem’s commandments in their new land and for its even more extensive listing of the punishments promised to them should they do something else. This latter passage is known as the Tochechah ‘admonition’.

“Our custom is to read a Parasha that does not mention Tochechah, the Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah (and to read the Tochechah two weeks before Shavuot and Rosh Hashana) in order not to read Tochechah immediately prior to Rosh Hashanah” (Tosafot ad loc s.v. Kelalot).

Gemara Megillah 31b states that Ezra the Scribe instituted the public reading of the Tochechah in Vayikra 26:14-43 before Shavuot and that of Devarim 28: 15-68 before Rosh Hashana so that “Tichleh shana u`khaloseha” – “Let the year and its curses come to an end”.

The Gemara Megillah also states that it is for this reason that we read 98 curses in Ki Tavo. There are 98 curses which is equivalent to the word **נָצַח** (shiny clean) and also the word **סָלַח** (forgive).

Rabbi Mordechai Kornfeld adds an observation. The number of punishments mentioned in Devarim, according to the Tanchuma, is 100-less-two. This implies that there are not simply “98” punishments listed but rather 100, two of which are somehow different from the others. The K’Li Yakar explains that the two ‘missing’ ones are those of Devarim 28:61 *“Aside from these, Hashem will bring upon you any sickness and any punishment that is not written in the Torah”*. Rabbi Kornfeld expounds that the “sickness’ and the “punishment” of this pasuk are at the same time written and yet left unwritten. They are the two that have been removed from the count of one hundred. So perhaps it was Ezra’s intention when he instituted the reading of the Tochechah of Vayikra before Shavuot that we should take heed

of the 49 punishments and repent, and the 49 days of the Omer remind us of these punishments. Similarly, Ezra’s decree to read the Tochechah in Ki Tavo before Rosh Hashana reminds us to take heed of the 100 punishments and to repent, and the 100 blasts of the Shofar heard on Rosh Hashana remind us of the same theme.

Paradoxically, according to Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, Simcha – joy is one of the fundamental themes of Devarim as a book. The root שמח appears only once in each of Bereshit, Shemot, Vayikra and Bamidbar, but no less than twelve times in Devarim and it lies at the heart of the Mosaic vision of life in the land of Israel. That is where we serve Hashem with joy.

Joy plays a key role in two contexts in Ki Tavo. One has to do with the bringing of first- fruits to the Temple in Jerusalem. After describing the ceremony that took place, the Torah concludes: *“Then you will rejoice in all the good things that the Lord your G-d has given you and your family, along with the Levites and the stranger in your midst”* (Devarim 26:11).

The other context is quite different and astonishing. It occurs in the text of the curses and the differences in the two passages are notable. The curses in Vayikra end on a note of hope. Those in Devarim end in bleak despair. The Vayikra curses speak of a total abandonment of Judaism by the people. The people walk be-keri with Hashem, variously translated as 'with hostility,' 'rebelliously,' or 'contemptuously.' But the curses in Devarim are provoked simply "because you did not serve the Lord your G-d with joy and gladness of heart out of the abundance of all things" (Devarim 28:47).

What does the Torah mean when it attributes national disaster to a lack of joy? Why does joy seem to matter more than happiness? Happiness is an attitude to life as a whole, while joy lives in the moment. As J. D. Salinger once said, "Happiness is a solid, joy is a liquid." Happiness is something you pursue. But joy is not. It discovers you. It has to do with a sense of connection to other people or to G-d. It comes from a different realm than happiness. It is a social emotion. It is the exhilaration we feel when we merge with others. It is the redemption of solitude.

Hence Moses' insistence that the capacity for joy is what gives the Jewish people the strength to endure. Without it, we become vulnerable to the multiple disasters set out in the curses in Ki Tavo.

As we approach Rosh Hashana, we should try and find blessings in every curse or try to turn each curse we experience into a blessing.

Shana Tova U'Metukah