

Behukotai 5784

Responding to Roxanne Garrett

Roxy, you got one of the most difficult texts in Torah and managed to make beautiful thoughtful meaning out of it. Every generation has found this text to be so problematic and challenging that the tradition is to whisper the curses from the Torah instead of chant them.

I do not believe in a G-d of reward and punishment. But I do believe in a G-d of consequences. I do believe that our actions matter and we should understand the chain of events that they set into motion. I do believe that as human beings we seek to deflect responsibility, to take comfort in the pretension of inevitability, and to hide in blame.

I do not believe that every occurrence, whether desired or undesired, is of our making, but I do believe that some are. Particularly when we open our lens from the story of the individual to the story of the collective, and from the story of this generation to the story of all the generations. Some at that distance see biology, but Leviticus would have us see the human hand in both blessing and curse.

We have the power, G-d is telling us here in Torah. WE have the power to bring blessing to the world or to bring curse. We have the power to make our world abundant, sustainable, just, peaceful. We also have the power to create a living hell on earth – the only kind of hell there is – to destroy the ecosystem, to create starvation, to create forever war. It is up to us, the parasha is telling us, G-d is telling us, it is up to us. “I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you,” G-d will say two books of Torah from now, “life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life so that you and your offspring may live.”

I keep thinking that I have no more words to say about Israel and Gaza, and to some degree it's true. I am out of words that could be useful or could mitigate the suffering. Many of us have been pleading since October 7th for

honoring life, for protecting life, for restraint and precision. When it became clear that that wasn't going to happen, we started begging for the release of the hostages in exchange for an immediate end to the war. Now so many months have passed. The hostages are not home. The people of Gaza have been homeless and starving for six plus months. The one remaining thing to pray for beyond the release of the hostages was that the homeless starving people huddled in tents at the southern edge of the strip, in Rafah, would not be bombed, would not face tanks. But that has now happened.

Yes, we have the power to curse ourselves, to create the only hell there is, hell on earth.

Let me be clear, this is Hamas's doing. They made a choice to use human beings as shields. They made a choice to take and hold hostages. They made a choice to siphon decades of the world's aid money intended for the Palestinian people on a labyrinth of tunnels whose purpose is to hide them from the consequences of their murderous campaigns, leaving women and children to be killed in their stead. They made a choice to twist Islam into a call to murder and eliminate Jews. They made a choice to brutalize, rape, and murder as many Jews as possible on October 7th. They've made all of these choices, and they continue to walk away from deal after deal to end the war.

It is also, obviously, Israel's doing – the government, the military, and the people who continue to support this government. Over the last 20-plus sermons I've made every argument I know for why Israel should stop this terrible, terrible war. I'm not going to repeat them today – probably ten hours of my words on this subject are available online – but I will say two more things about our parasha.

In this parasha, the detailed and terrible curses laid out as consequences for our actions culminate in our people's expulsion from the promised land. Today this remains, or is again, a possibility. As Israel moves steadily toward becoming a pariah state and it is more and more difficult for our president and other staunch American allies to defend its behavior, the

threat of the loss of Jewish self-determination in the modern era is ever more real.

But, and finally, curses, hell on earth, is not the end of the story. The end of the story is change, repentance, turning, return, teshuva. It is recognizing the causes of the curses, our own contributions to hell on earth. And choosing to stop, to stop participating in those causes. In fact, long before the end, four times in the descriptions of the curses, G-d pauses and says “if despite all these curses, you remain hostile to Me... if these things fail to change you...” then there will be more. The opportunities are always available to stop creating curse. Any day can be the day that we choose to turn ourselves toward blessing, toward the G-d of love and life, toward actions that lead to abundance, sustainability, justice, and peace. And even after we refuse again and again to make the hostage deal, to make the ceasefire deal, to make peace, G-d does not reject us, ever. It is never too late. It can still happen today, tomorrow, any day. We can stop. We can turn. We can change. According to Torah, it will still happen.

“Yet, even then, even [then]...I will not reject them or spurn them so as to destroy them. I will remember in their favor the covenant with the ancients, whom I freed from the land of Mitzrayim in the sight of the nations to be their G-d, I the Eternal.”

G-d does not give up on us. Ever. We must not give up either.

Shabbat Shalom.