

Parashat Ki Tavo

This week's parashah opens with the details of an interesting ritual that, according to the Deuteronomist, our people were to perform on their entrance to the Land of Canaan. As we read, "When you enter the land that the LORD your God is giving you as a heritage, and you possess it and settle in it, you shall take some of every fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish His name. You shall go to the priest in charge at that time and say to him, 'I acknowledge this day before the LORD your God that I have entered the land that the LORD swore to our fathers to assign us.' The priest shall take the basket from your hand and set it down in front of the altar of the LORD your God. You shall then recite as follows before the LORD your God: 'My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meagre 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 labour upon us. We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. He 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 which You, O LORD, have given me.'"

In this passage the Israelite is commanded to bring the first fruits of his produce before Hashem. However, it is noticeable that the theme of fertility plays a secondary role to that of recognising Hashem's guiding hand over Israelite history. This is the larger picture which the Israelite is to acknowledge by means of the curious ceremony. Thus the Israelite acknowledges God's guidance of Israelite history and of his unique place in it from its humble beginnings, freeing it from oppression and giving it the land. Such indeed is the core message of our parashah as it develops beyond the curious ceremony described in Devarim 26. God's miraculous intervention on Israel's behalf is thus not only presented as something that occurred in the past but is something which is promised to both present and future generations. However, according to the text of our portion this promise of miraculous intervention is conditional. As Devarim 28 explains, "Now, if you obey the LORD your God, to observe faithfully all His commandments which I enjoin upon you this day, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings shall come upon you and take effect, if you will but heed the word of the LORD your God: Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the issue of your womb, the produce of your soil, and the offspring of your cattle, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be in your comings and blessed shall you be in your goings. The LORD will put to rout before you the enemies who attack you; they will march out against you by a single road, but flee from you by many roads. The LORD will ordain blessings for you upon your barns and upon all your undertakings: He will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you." And so it goes on. This section of Devarim 28 thus promises God's benevolent intervention on our people's behalf in return for our obedience to the commandments. This

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section of promised blessings is summed up in Devarim 28:13-14, which states, "The LORD will make you the head, not the tail; you will always be at the top and never at the bottom - if only you obey and faithfully observe the commandments of the LORD your God that I enjoin upon you this day, and do not deviate to the right or to the left from any of the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day and turn to the worship of other gods." Sounds good! The alternative prospects for our people in case of our disobedience, however, are thence spelled out in an increasingly terrifying series of maledictions that curiously outnumber the stated blessings for obedience by a factor of five to one. As we read, "if you do not obey the LORD your God to observe faithfully all His commandments and laws which I enjoin upon you this day, all these curses shall come upon you and take effect: Cursed shall you be in the city and cursed shall you be in the country. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the issue of your womb and the produce of your soil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock. Cursed shall you be in your comings and cursed shall you be in your goings. The LORD will let loose against you calamity, panic, and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out because of your evildoing in forsaking Me. The LORD will make pestilence cling to you, until He has put an end to you in the land that you are entering to possess. The LORD will strike you with consumption, fever, and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew; they shall hound you until you perish. The skies above your head shall be copper and the earth under your iron. The LORD will make the rain of your land dust, and sand shall drop on you from the sky, until you are wiped out. The LORD will put you to rout before your enemies; you shall march out against them by a single road, but flee from them by many roads; and you shall become a horror to all the kingdoms of the earth. You carcasses shall become food for all the birds of the sky and all the beasts of the earth, with none to frighten them off." And so it also goes on, with each stated curse becoming increasingly horrific! It doesn't take a genius to understand the binary terms of the covenant according to the Deuteronomist: The God who miraculously intervened on behalf of our ancestors to create and then save us from Egyptian slavery with a display of overwhelming power, will continue to decisively intervene on our behalf, for better or for worse, for the blessing or the curse, in direct relation to our obedience to the terms of the covenant as set out in the many commandments. Indeed, the Deuteronomistic histories of Joshua, Judges, 1st and 2nd Samuel, 1st and 2nd Kings, endeavour to demonstrate how this theology determined the rise and fall of our people up to and including the period of the Babylonian exile.

The black and white binary theological paradigm presented in these Deuteronomistic texts, and through which Israel's history was filtered, had a profound effect upon our people's psyche. This was so much so that the idea of God's miraculously intervening with His powerful hand, dishing out blessings and curses according to not just national but individual fidelity to the commandments, has been prevalent for thousands of years - indeed, not just among Jews, but among Christians too. We thus witness the talmidim in the first century asking Yeshua whether the blindness from birth of a man whom he had just healed was due to his sins or those of his parents. The Deuteronomistic premise to their question was

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something that, it is apparent, Yeshua took careful aim at. His answer to their question was a pointed “neither this man nor his parents sinned!” Indeed, we can imagine that his answer provoked no small degree of cognitive dissonance among the talmidim since it obviously conflicted with the oh so apparently clear and widespread theology of the Deuteronomistic texts. The allure of the Deuteronomistic paradigm essentially lay, as it still lies today for those who embrace it, in its binary simplicity. It presupposes that whenever something good or bad happens, either on a national or individual level, it is a direct Heavenly intervention, for better or for worse, a divine blessing or curse. It was in line with this theology that some evangelical leaders in the US, for instance, suggested that the destruction wrought in 2017 by Hurricane Harvey was not a consequence of global warming but was instead a divine judgement on the nation for its tolerance of gay people. “Jesus sends the message home,” Minister Kevin Swanson said on his radio programme, that “unless Americans repent, unless Houston repents, unless New Orleans repents, they will all likewise perish. That is the message that the Lord Jesus Christ is sending home right now to America.” But as Yeshua’s reply to his talmidim evidences life does not necessarily conform to this retribitional paradigm. For God, he said, “makes his sun shine on good and bad people alike, and he sends rain to the righteous and the unrighteous alike.” In fact Yeshua’s words are evidence that the Deuteronomistic theology isn’t given a free ride in Scripture. To the contrary, it is precisely issue that is targeted in the story of Iyov, whose ‘friends’ insisted that all the calamities that had befallen him must have been the result of a divine curse for his disobedience. If only he would acknowledge this and repent, they said, then God would surely bless him according to the clear terms of the Deuteronomistic covenant. For “So happy is the man whom God reprove; Do not reject the discipline of the Almighty. He injures, but He binds up; He wounds, but His hands heal. He will deliver you from six troubles; In seven no harm will reach you: In famine, He will redeem you from death, In war, from the sword. You will be sheltered from the scourging tongue; You will have no fear when violence comes. You will laugh at violence and starvation, and have no fear of wild beasts. For you will have a pact with the rocks in the field, and the beasts of the field will be your allies. You will know that all is well in your tent; When you visit your wife you will never fail. You will see that your offspring are many, Your descendants like the grass of the earth. You will come to the grave in ripe old age, As shocks of grain are taken away in their season. See, we have inquired into this and it is so; Hear it and accept it.” (Iyov 5:17-27). Iyov’s friends re-present the Deuteronomistic paradigm as if it is beyond question - and they re-present it to him as if it is a simple statement of fact. And yet at the end of the story, after much heated debate, Hashem is recorded as chastising these friends and agreeing with Iyov. “You have not spoken rightly about me, as my servant Iyov has,” said God. Question marks over the Deuteronomistic theology are also at the heart of Kohelet. He too is acutely aware of the binary nature of the paradigm - that God singles out the righteous for miraculous blessings and the wicked for curses. But, so he writes, “Alongside justice there is wickedness, Alongside righteousness there is wickedness.” In other words, according to Kohelet, God does not at all treat the righteous and the wicked differently - at least in this life. As we have heard, according to the Deuteronomistic texts God ought to miraculously intervene to defend and uplift the righteous

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while simultaneously destroying the wicked, but as Kohelet wrote, "I further observed all the oppression that goes on under the sun: the tears of the oppressed, with none to comfort them; and the power of their oppressors - with none to comfort them." In other words, no such intervention could be found. Indeed, Kohelet openly doubted that God actually does intervene to save the righteous, since "although I am aware that 'It will be well with those who revere God since they revere Him, and it will not be well with the scoundrel, and he will not live long, because he does not revere God' - here is a frustration that occurs in the world: sometimes an upright man is requited according to the conduct of the scoundrel; and sometimes the scoundrel is requited according to the conduct of the upright. I say all *that* is frustration." It was especially frustrating for Kohelet because, as he also observes, the simple binary theology of the Deuteronomistic texts does not, in his opinion, match reality. The Psalms too are also often a witness to further theological struggle and frustration on this matter of the Deuteronomistic paradigm. Tehillim 44 is a classic and, in view of the tragedy of modern Jewish history, most pertinent example in this respect. The Psalm begins as so many do with a peal of praise for God, recounting the stories of ancient miracles which had been passed on from generation to generation. "We have heard, O God, our fathers have told us the deeds You performed in their time, in days of old. With Your hand You planted them, displacing nations; You brought misfortune on peoples, and drove them out." This is a direct reference to the story of the miraculous calling out of the patriarchs and of the miracles of the Exodus as recited in our parashah's curious ceremony of thanksgiving. According to these stories, so the Psalmist continues, "It was not by their sword that they took the land, their arm did not give them victory, but Your right hand, Your arm, and Your goodwill, for You favoured them." The Psalmist proceeds to make it very clear that he has been raised on these stories and upon this Deuteronomistic theology and has accordingly hoped that God would likewise perform miraculous acts of deliverance and blessing in his own generation. And "Yet You have rejected and disgraced us; You do not go with our armies. You make us retreat before our foe; our enemies plunder us at will. You let them devour us like sheep; You disperse us among the nations. You sell Your people for no fortune, You set no high price on them. You make us the butt of our neighbours, the scorn and derision of those around us. You make us a byword among the nations, a laughingstock among the peoples. I am always aware of my disgrace; I am wholly covered with shame at the sound of taunting revilers, in the presence of the vengeful foe." The Psalmist lifts these words from the list of curses in this week's parashah, neatly summarising the theology within - that God judges those that breach His covenant and break His commandments. According to our parashah there simply is no alternative understanding to be had. And yet, just as Iyov argued, so too the Psalmist argued that, "All this has come upon us, yet we have not forgotten You, or been false to Your covenant. Our hearts have not gone astray, nor have our feet swerved from Your path." This latter statement is a reference to the admonition in Devarim 28 not to "deviate to the right or to the left from any of the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day and turn to the worship of other gods." Like Yeshua, Kohelet and Iyov the Psalmist has his sights set upon the Deuteronomistic theology! He continues, "If we forgot the name of our God and spread forth our hands to a foreign god, God would surely search it out, for He knows the secrets of the

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heart. It is for Your sake [or it is because of You] that we are slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered." The Psalmist's pain and frustration are laid bare. If it *had* been the case that his generation *had* sinned then he could well understand their sufferings as being from the hand of a cursing God. We can be sure that in that event he would have accepted the medicine, and would not have complained however traumatic the punishment might have been. And yet, just as *lyov* maintained his innocence in this regard, so too did the Psalmist. His generation, he insisted, had NOT sinned. So why then he asked had all these curses fallen on Israel? The only answer to this question so the Psalmist concluded was that God Himself was breaking His own covenant! Of course, none of this was supposed to happen - God was supposed to be a covenant keeping God, but it had! What other theological explanation for Israel's suffering and God's apparent inactivity could there be? Accordingly his next words strike me as being particularly shocking, especially when we set them against the opening lines to the Psalm that recalled the stories of God's miracles of old. "Rouse Yourself" or as Stern translates it, "Wake Up!" "why do You sleep, O Lord? Awaken, do not reject us forever! Why do You hide Your face, ignoring our affliction and distress? We lie prostrate in the dust; our body clings to the ground. Arise and help us, redeem us, as befits Your faithfulness." This was a Delia Smith moment if ever there was one! If I may paraphrase: "To the best God in the world. Where are you? Let's be 'avin you!" It was a stunning moment when Saint Delia made her shocking half time plea to the Norwich City fans. Needless to say we still lost! While we don't know the outcome of the matter for the Psalmist in his time after his own Delia Smith moment, it is nevertheless quite clear that Tehillim 44 represents another serious Scriptural question mark against the Deuteronomistic paradigm. Indeed, it should be noted that what made it all the more worse for the Psalmist in his distress, as it may be for us too when we feel that God hasn't shown up as we have been promised, were all the stories of God's past miracles in ancient times. Here then was someone who was raised and hitherto believed in the theology of the Deuteronomistic histories but who found that it did not match his own or his peoples present dire reality - a fact that, as I have said, must have greatly added to his suffering. Indeed, his pain and struggles in this respect have been repeated throughout our painful history as a people. In every generation whenever we have found ourselves in pain and suffering our have wrestled with the Deuteronomistic paradigm. During the Crusades, the Inquisitions and Pogroms hundreds of thousands of faithful Jews were tortured and perished waiting in vain for the God of the Exodus to show up and deliver them. So too in our own time millions of Jews hoped that this same God of miraculous deliverance would rescue them from the Warsaw Ghetto, from countless concentration camps and from the extermination camps of Sobibor, Chelmno, Treblinka, Majdanek, Belzec and Auschwitz. And yet, regardless of this hope, they still perished. No wonder then that today countless Jews continue to question the Deuteronomistic paradigm. According to the Deuteronomistic paradigm the murder of one million innocent children in the Shoah can only be explained as divine punishment. I don't know about you but if find that suggestion offensive. In fact, I am sure that the Psalmist, *lyov*, *Kohelet*, *Yeshua* and so many other dissonant Scriptural voices would nod in agreement.