



Chased by Blessing

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Parashat Ki Tavo 5779

In Parashat Ki Tavo, we encounter beautiful blessings and truly chilling curses. At first it seems that the loveliness of the blessings is no match for the horror of the curses. Even a cursory reading of the *parashah* yields that the intensity of the curses clearly outstrips the fullness of the blessings: The *parashah* dedicates a mere 14 verses to the description of the blessings, whereas the number of verses devoted to describing the curses is 54. We are left with the theologically difficult and emotionally unbearable suggestion that, in fact, God is more interested in cursing us than in blessing us, that Moshe is not engaging in hyperbole when he says:

דברים כח:סג

וְהָיָה כְּאִשֶּׁר שָׁשׂ ה' עֲלֵיכֶם לְהִיטִיב אֶתְכֶם וּלְהַרְבּוֹת אֶתְכֶם כֵּן יִשִּׁישׁ ה' עֲלֵיכֶם לְהַאֲבִיד אֶתְכֶם וְלִהְשָׁמִיד אֶתְכֶם וְנִסְחַתְתֶּם מֵעַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר אֶתָּה בָּא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ.

Devarim 28:63

And it will be that just as God rejoiced over you to benefit you and increase you, so God will rejoice over you to annihilate you and to destroy you and you will be removed from the earth that you are coming to in order to inherit it.

In the literal sense, the verse implies that God is just as happy to make us suffer as He is to improve our lot, but the preponderance of curses suggests that maybe God rejoices *more* over destroying us than He does in making us great. Maybe God, God forbid, wants us to fail, and that is why the section of curses is so elaborate. Yet, it is possible to learn from the imbalance in the presentation of the *berakhot* and *kelalot* something that does not point in a negative and hurtful direction. What appears at first as God's being stingy or reluctant with blessings actually points to the possibility of a deeper and more rewarding relationship, one that goes beyond payment and punishment, recompense and reward.



The blessings and curses are opposite in their intent, but both the passage that recounts the *berakhot* and the one that describes the *kelalot* begin with similar language:

דברים כח:ג

בָּרוּךְ אַתָּה בְּעִיר, וּבָרוּךְ אַתָּה בַּשָּׂדֶה.

Devarim 28:3

Blessed are you in the city, blessed are you in the field.

דברים כח:טז

אָרוּר אַתָּה בְּעִיר, וְאָרוּר אַתָּה בַּשָּׂדֶה.

Devarim 28:16

Cursed are you in the city, cursed are you in the field.

Throughout the blessings and curses, mirror language can be found. However there is one moment where this parallel language doesn't seem to make sense. The first two verses of chapter 28 (immediately preceding ***Barukh atah ba'ir, blessed are you in the city***) read as follows:

דברים כח:א-ב

וְהָיָה אִם שָׁמַעַתְּ תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם וְנָתַתִּיךָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ, עָלֶיךָ עַל כָּל גּוֹי הָאָרֶץ: וּבָאוּ עָלֶיךָ כָּל הַבְּרָכוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְהַשִּׁיגְךָ כִּי תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ.

Devarim 28:1-2

And it will be if you listen to the voice of HaShem your God to be careful to perform all of His commandments which I am commanding you today, then HaShem your God will set you on high over all of the nations of the earth. And these blessings will come **and catch up to you** (*v'hisigukha*) when you listen to the voice of HaShem your God.

The verb, **וְהַשִּׁיגְךָ**, **will catch up to you**, or perhaps “will grab you,” is very strange in the context of blessing. It fits much more naturally in the context of a curse: We are generally only “caught” by something we are trying to avoid and are running away from. And in fact, this terminology is used twice and much more fittingly in the section of curses!¹ How are we to

¹ It appears both at the very beginning:

דברים כח:טו

וְהָיָה אִם לֹא תִשְׁמַע בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֵר לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת כָּל מִצְוֹתַי וְחֻקֹּתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם וּבָאוּ עָלֶיךָ כָּל הַקְּלָלוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וְהַשִּׁיגְךָ.

Devarim 28:15

And it will be if you do not listen to the voice of HaShem your God to be careful to perform all of His commandments which I am commanding you today, these curses will come and catch up to you.



understand the use of this term, **וְהִשִּׁיגְךָ** and **it will catch up to you**, in the positive context of the *berakhot*? Why does it appear that we are running away from something that is ostensibly good for us?

In Pirkei Avot, Antigonus teaches the value of deliberately choosing to forgo reward:

משנה אבות א:ג

אנטיגנוס איש סוכו קיבל משמעון הצדיק. הוא היה אומר: אל תהיו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב על מנת לקבל פרס, אלא הוו כעבדים המשמשין את הרב על מנת שלא לקבל פרס² ויהי מורא שמיים עליכם.

Mishnah Avot 1:3

Antigonus man of Sokho received from Shimon HaTzadik. He would say: Do not be like servants who minister to the master on the provision of receiving reward (*peras*). Rather, be like servants who minister to the master on the provision of not receiving reward and the fear of heaven shall be upon you.

According to Antigonus, though there are many places in the Torah, like in our *parashah*, where God guarantees reward, there is something inherently problematic in serving God on that basis. We should want *not* to be paid, and even if we know that the payment is coming, we should actively try to avoid it. If we do receive any physical or financial benefit we should feel as though it has “caught us” because reward is the opposite of what we are seeking.

The Rambam explains that even a slightly transactional approach to our relationship with God is problematic:

פירוש הרמב"ם משנה אבות א:ג

פרס יקרא הגמול אשר יגמל האדם ממי שאין לו טובה עליו אבל יעשה זה על דרך החסד והחנינה, כמו

And in verse 45:

דברים כח:מה

וּבָאוּ עֲלֶיךָ כָּל הַקְּלָלוֹת הָאֵלֶּה וַיִּדְפוּךָ וְהִשִּׁיגְךָ עַד הַשְׁמָדְךָ כִּי לֹא שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשָׁמֵר מִצְוֹתָיו וְחֻקֵּיהֶם אֲשֶׁר צִוָּךְ.

Devarim 28:45

And all of these curses will come to you, chase after you, and catch up to you until you are destroyed. For you did not listen to the voice of HaShem your God to observe His commandments and statutes which He has commanded you.

² There is some debate over the proper way to render this phrase, with many rendering it **שלא על מנת לקבל פרס**. The text above is accurate according to the Rambam. It is also both the reading of the Kaufman manuscript of the Mishnah, and the more “difficult” reading—additional factors suggesting this is the original reading.



שיאמר אדם לעבדו או לבנו הקטן או לאשתו "עשה לי כך וכך ואתן לך דינר או שנים." זהו ההפרש אשר בין פרס לשכר. כי השכר הוא שינתן בדין, ואמר זה החסיד שאתם לא תעבדו הש"י ע"מ שייטיב לכם ויגמלכם חסד ותקווה לגמול ותעבדוהו בעבורו. ואמנם עבדוהו כעבדים שאינם מקוים להטבה ולא לגמילות חסד. רצה בזה שיהיו עובדין מאהבה...

Rambam commentary to Avot 1:3

Peras, reward, is the recompense which a person will be bestowed by a person to whom one does not owe a favor but they do it anyway through the way of kindness and graciousness, like one who says to his servant or to his young child or to his wife, "Do such and such for me and I will give you a dinar-coin or two." This is the difference between reward (*peras*) and payment (*skhar*). For payment is what he must be given by law. And this righteous person (Antignos) says that you shouldn't serve Blessed God on the provision that He will benefit you and bestow kindness upon you and hope for compensation and serve Him for it. Indeed you should serve Him like servants³ who do not hope for benefit and do not want the giving of kindness, rather they serve from love.

The Rambam intensifies Antignos's teaching by distinguishing between two types of recompense: reward and payment. According to the Rambam, it is obvious that one should not serve God in order to receive payment; we are not God's employees and God does not "owe" us anything in exchange for our serving Him. Therefore, this mishnah's teaching is both more subtle and more forceful. According to the Rambam, a person may not even enjoy rewards or incentives or gifts that God may promise for doing God "a favor." We are to serve God out of love and any involvement of personal benefit sullies—or possibly invalidates—that kind of service.

However, R. Hayyim of Volozhin's⁴ interpretation⁵ of this concept complicates this insight of the Rambam. He argues that it isn't so clear that trying to avoid reward from God is always the correct approach. It can be more loving to actually accept reward from God graciously and with the right attitude:

רוח חיים משנה אבות אג

ונעמיק עוד להשכיל בזה כי הנה אחרי אשר עיקר כוונת הבריאיה היא להיטיב לברואיו. וא"כ לפ"ז יתכן כי העבודה היותר חשובה ומקובלת תהי' ע"מ לקבל פרס כי יעבוד ע"מ שייטיב לו שיגיע מזה נחת רוח לפניו ית"ש. אך באמת אם מכין עבודתו שיגיע לו שכר וכוונתו רק כדי שיגיע מזה נחת רוח לה' ית"ש בהטיבו עם ברואיו חלף עבודתם, זהו העבודה המעולה. אכן אם מכין הוא להנאתו, היא העבודה הפחותה שהזהירנו מזה...

³ It is possible that the Rambam is specifically referring to slaves, rather than servants, as slaves are not paid.

⁴ 1749-1821, Lithuania.

⁵ In fact, this is the sixth of six explanations that R. Hayyim provides.



Ruah Hayyim to Avot 1:3

Let us understand this more deeply, given that the principal intention of Creation was [for God] to benefit His creatures. If so, it might make sense to say that the most significant and wanted service would be “on the provision of receiving reward” when he serves on the condition that [God] will benefit him, for from this Blessed God will have pleasure (*naḥat ruah*). In truth, if he intends in his service [of God] that he will get reward, but his intention is only that this will bring God pleasure—in His ability to benefit His creatures in exchange for their service—then this is the best service. However, if he intends for his *own* pleasure, then this is the inferior service that we have been warned against...

In order to understand R. Hayyim, it is helpful to imagine that you have a grown child living in another part of the country and she comes home to visit. This visit is something that you, the parent, have been waiting for and you lovingly prepare a special meal for your daughter with all of her favorite foods. Each component of making this meal, even the most tedious shopping and chopping, is cast in a different light by the excitement you have about the visit. What you want is to provide for your beloved child whom you haven’t seen in so long. Watching *her* enjoy the meal brings *you* great joy and pleasure.

According to the Rambam, the principle of refusing even the slightest reward would mean that a child should always refuse (or at least not want) the help or gift that a parent offers. The child should come home ready to help her parents and want to serve them since she owes them her life and an endless debt of gratitude. She should not want to eat this meal and should refuse it. However, according to R. Hayyim, it would be the height of rudeness for your child to come home and refuse to eat the meal that you provided! According to him, your daughter could approach this meal with one of two possible attitudes. She could understand that eating and appreciating this meal is something that will make you feel happy and valued as a parent. She might even make sure to eat less earlier in anticipation, in order to provide you the pleasure of providing for her. If she does so, even though technically you are the one who is benefiting her, she allows you to indulge her because doing so brings *you* so much joy.

However, there is another possible way this meal could play out. If your child only comes home because she is hungry, that is another situation entirely. She doesn’t come home because she wants to see you, she doesn’t recognize what you have done for her and why, she only sees the food on the plate and eats to satisfy her own stomach and not to please you. In that case, the child does not do right by accepting the meal and your beneficence, and following the Rambam’s guidelines would be considered better behavior.



But, in order to truly understand the perspective of the Rambam, that any type of payment or reward is inherently problematic, we need to extend the metaphor. Imagine your child comes home and follows R. Hayyim's approach. She eats to her heart's content and you are so happy to see her there enjoying the meal that you have provided. She thanks you for the meal, helps you clean up, and leaves two twenty dollar bills on the table.

You're not a server, you're a parent. Of course, you don't feed your child in the hope that she will pay you, but because you love her and giving to her brings you joy. It is inappropriate for her to offer you money in exchange for something that you offer out of love. It demonstrates that she doesn't understand what your gift means and she doesn't know how to value it. You want a hug and a thank you and you absolutely do not want money.

A tip left by a child is, frankly, revolting. The presence of the money reflects poorly on her understanding of your relationship—or worse: reflects poorly on the relationship itself. Because you love your child so much, her money is not only something that you are loathe to accept, but also something that you are horrified that she would think to give you. However, in other circumstances, money and payment is the respectful and most appropriate way to show appreciation. If you are an employer who values your employees, you pay them. If an employee asks for a raise, and you instead offer them a hug or the opportunity to spend more quality time with you, you do not understand the nature of that relationship.

What our *parashah* and the mishnah in Avot and its commentaries teach us is that we have the opportunity to determine our relationship with God through our attitude towards God's rewards. If we think of God as a boss, He will treat us as employees and compensate us accordingly. If we think of God as a parent, He will relate to us in that way. Choosing to pursue a relationship with God in which receiving benefit from God for our own material enrichment is an absurd or inappropriate goal is the fullest expression of **וְבָאוּ עֲלֶיךָ כָּל הַבְּרָכוֹת** **וְהָאֱלֹהִים וְהַשִּׁיגָךְ**, **and all of these blessings will come to you and chase you.** The ultimate goal of the *berakhot* is that we transcend the need for *berakhot*. We will be so close to God that we will not want His blessing. It will make sense to us that the section which describes the *berakhot* will be abbreviated, because we will be so in love with God, so happy and comfortable with one another, that talk of reward would be unwelcome.

Money in the forms of gifts, payments, and loans can also be one of the most complicated components of interpersonal relationships. Some people really appreciate handmade,





heartfelt gifts with no price tag, and some people feel more valued when they receive an expensive present. Some parents love to be taken out to dinner by their children; some parents need to be the ones to cover the check. We should think carefully about how money fits into our current relationships and how money can change our relationships for better or for worse. Sometimes giving a friend in need an interest-free loan will make them grateful and will strengthen the relationship; sometimes the involvement of that debt and obligation can put enough strain on a friendship to break it. Should we give money to a sibling or friend in need or will that cause them to resent us? Does receiving this money make us feel taken care of or does it make us feel belittled?

In subtle ways, almost all of our relationships have subtle or overt financial threads. Being a good friend can be expensive. Our friends assume that we will pay the cost of a plane ticket to attend their out-of-town wedding, give them a gift in honor of the birth of their child, contribute to their bike ride for charity, or attend their synagogue's fundraising dinner. People who invite us to their tables and their parties expect that we can afford to invite them in return. Some spouses expect expensive gifts and some spouses resent expensive gifts. We all have different approaches to money and we also have different levels of financial capacity. What may seem like a slight expense to me could be a budget-breaker for you. We tend to find it distasteful to talk about money, but financial issues are often the stakes in an argument or misunderstanding that appears to be about something else. It is more wise to speak openly and think sensitively about how spending can improve, destroy, or simply change our relationships than it is to ignore it. We need to acknowledge that money can be both a blessing and its opposite. Our *parashah* recognizes this complexity: sometimes we run to a reward and sometimes we need to run from it.

Wishing you a Shabbat of welcome blessing.

