

“The Ultimate Curse”
Parashat Ki Tavo
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A short while ago we listened to the reading of the tocheicha, the long list of curses in today’s parsha. You might have observed that it was chanted very quietly and very quickly. Traditionally the tocheicha is chanted that way, for the curses are so very difficult to hear and process.

You might also have observed that the curses are ordered from less to more horrific. Note that none are mild. No hay fever or long commute. Just when we might think the punishments couldn’t get any worse, we are shocked by the next, more disturbing image.

What, according to this scheme, is the worst possible punishment? Look at the penultimate verse in the tocheicha: (Deut. 28:67): “In the morning you shall say, ‘If only it were evening’ and in the evening you shall say, ‘If only it were morning’ because of what your heart shall dread and your eyes shall see.”

“If only it were evening...if only it were morning.” The verse, read according to the Targum Yerushalmi, expresses a desperate wish for a better future. That may be a familiar sensation; a day that is so trying that all we can do is wait for tomorrow. But according to the Bavli (Sotah 49a-264) the verse is even more despondent: The curse of each day is more severe than that of the preceding. Thus we can read the verse to mean, “If only it were yesterday evening.” Rather than a desperate wish for a better future, a hope for things to improve, it bespeaks a desperate wish for a return to the past, an acknowledgement that things will only get worse.

But of course, we are counseled to be careful for what we wish. For that is precisely what happens, in the next verse, verse 68: We are returned, against our will, to our past. Here, then, is the harshest punishment of all: “The Lord will send you back to Egypt in galleys, by a route I told you that you should not see again...”



Everything we have endured, everything we have experienced and learned from, is undone in a moment. It took forty years to make the journey from slavery, humiliation and deprivation to this point; independence, sense of self, poised to live the fulfillment of God's earliest promises to our forefathers. And after those 40 years, this final curse is an instantaneous unwinding of that progress, that growth we achieved year by painful year, step by grueling step.

In one fell swoop this ultimate curse sweeps away more than our hope for the future; it takes from us all we have gained from our past. Our memories, our lessons learned, our contributions, our evolution as a people; everything we learned, accomplished, achieved is undone. And when the lessons and experiences of our past are undone, we ourselves are undone.

It's as if we never were. Whatever remains of our lives, it is not our true selves. Literally, our very selves are negated. In a punishment far greater than hunger, military defeat or disease, this punishment takes our future and our past at once. And so our very essence is denied, negated; our self is canceled out and we are nothing.

I can describe this curse so vividly because I have seen it in all its might. I saw it again just this past week when David and I took our children on our regular visit to North Carolina. From the airport we go directly to the Alzheimer's wing on the assisted living facility where my mother-in-law now lives.

Two crucial points that I need to make along the way. The first is that my mother-in-law feels no pain. It is true that she wants for no physical comfort as the staff sees to her every need. The irony of Alzheimer's Disease is that the more it ravages her, the less aware she is of her limitations. The more she loses, the less she misses. Her physical health is reasonably strong. She will likely live many more years. And we all recognize that it will be a life stripped of purpose.

The cruelty of Alzheimer's is not physical helplessness. We know too many physically limited individuals whose intellect and spirit continue to soar, whose lives are rich and purposeful despite what their bodies cannot do.

The cruelty of Alzheimer's is the unwinding of the life story of those it strikes. It is manifest in the polite, pleasant smile my mother-in-law wears when she sees a

photo of her beloved husband of 44 years. “Well, he looks very nice,” she will say agreeably. And 44 years of love and devotion, of struggle and triumph and all the glorious and mundane details of building a life and a family are undone, as if they never existed. With no flicker of recognition she can only offer that this man, her life’s partner, looks like he’s very nice. And with nothing left of her memories of who she is, whom she loved, what she leaned and valued and believed in, the Selma we once knew no longer exists. She really isn’t a mother anymore, or a grandmother or a friend. And in her memory, she never really was. That is what has been taken from her.

And here is the second point I must make: When we enter the facility and catch our first glimpse of her, the pull of love we feel is very, very real. When she told David two days ago “you treat me nice”, we all responded with tears of gratitude. By now, a few days later, she has forgotten. But for a moment, David was able to bring his mother pleasure and gratitude and he will continue to travel to see her every few months in hope of more such moments.

Selma’s strength has always been her ability to love unequivocally, to give and accept with a depth of graciousness I have never seen matched. We will never abandon her. She has loved us through the years for no reason other than we are hers. We will continue to love her, always, for she is ours. From all the cruelty and indignity of the curse of my mother-in-law’s decline we will wrest something good and noble. We will teach our children as we teach ourselves how to care for our parents in their late years. We will give back a fraction of the love and patience she has given. And we will know that we have brought a measure of order and comfort to a journey otherwise spinning out of control.

For this spinning out of control, this undoing of who we are and what we have accomplished is the curse we really fear at some level. We are not really afraid of drought or enslavement. For all the parsha’s graphic imagery we don’t really fear that we will be reduced to cannibalism. But at some place we do worry that our lives may become meaningless, that we will lose what we were, and thus what we may become. And though we do not voice this concern explicitly, at this season I think it underlies the most central of our prayers. I would suggest that it is the crux of our prayers during Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur.

When we sing in Avinu Malkeinu, Katvienu b'sefer hayim, we are not petitioning only for another year of life. Rather, when we ask to be recorded in the book of life we ask for lives of meaning, of purpose. We long for permanence—not for immortality, but enduring impact of however many years we are granted. We want to take what we have learned into the next years, so our years may matter. We do not ask to live forever. Rather, we ask that our lives matter, in our later years and even after we have gone. That what we have learned we may teach, and that what we teach may endure.

Our prayers for this season (despite the cards we send) are not for a happy year, or health, or material comfort. Rather, we pray for a shana tova, a good year, a year of meaningful action, and a year of contributions to our community that will be enduring.

I wish you every happiness in the coming year: Great physical comfort and prosperity and much love from you family and friends. More than that, enriched by your past, hopeful for the future, I wish you, in the year ahead, a life of great purpose.