



Becoming Blessings Worthy of

This week's Torah portion is filled with harsh rebuke. What's behind this?

The Most Unpopular Reading

No one likes to be reprimanded but sometimes we have to deal with it.

The Torah portion this week begins with wonderful blessings, but it then proceeds to describe what will happen if we do not follow God's commands. The description isn't pretty, to say the least.

Now, receiving an Aliyah is always considered an honor, but *which* aliya you received is also significant. Jewish communities have always honored their most respectable lay leaders and rabbis with the important aliyahs of the Ten Commandments or the Splitting of the Sea. The fifth Aliyah this week that describes the curses, runs the risk of being used in the opposite fashion; some might view it as an insult. Therefore, the custom is that nobody is 'honored' with the Aliyah; it's taken by the Torah reader himself.

The story is told about one synagogue in Europe where nobody wanted the Aliyah. One poor man finally agreed to take it for a significant monetary compensation, but on Shabbat morning, when the time for his Aliyah arrived, he was nowhere to be found. They searched high and low, but only after a long wait, he showed up puffing and panting to receive his "honor."

After the Torah reading, the Gabai asked him, “If you agreed to receive the Aliyah, why didn’t you show up on time?”

The fellow looked back at the Gabai and asked, “Do you think that I could support my family with one *tochecha*? I needed to run from one synagogue to the next, with the hope of making a decent living from between them all.”

Several years ago, there was a synagogue in Brooklyn with a similar issue. The Torah Reader was a kohen and could not take the Aliyah for himself (a kohen may only receive the first Aliyah, because if he takes a different one, people might question his status as a kohen). They searched for a volunteer to take the Aliyah, but nobody offered their services; nobody wanted to be associated with the Torah’s curses. After all, we all need as many blessings as we can get.

That Shabbat morning, the Torah was open, the congregation was waiting, and nobody wanted to take it. You can’t just skip that portion; the parsha needs to be read consecutively. Finally, a chossid named Reb Yaakov Goldberg *a”h* reminded everyone of the Rebbe’s explanation which he had often repeated — that the curses, on a deeper level, were actually blessings. In that light, and to allow the Torah reading to proceed, Reb Yaakov said that he would take it himself. From then on, the Aliyah became his own. Twice a year, whenever the Torah’s curses were read, he would be honored with that Aliyah (heard from his son, Rabbi Dovid Goldberg of Brazil).

Solving the Drought

Chassidism teaches us that something good must emerge from every situation. Certainly, there must be something good that we could benefit from listening to the the Tochacha.

A story is told about a group of Jewish farmers who came to the Alter Rebbe with a problem. For their livelihood, they leased fields from the

local nobleman; they would pay him a straight fee for their rights to the fields and then keep the profits. That year, there had been a drought. All their hard work had gone to waste, and they were at risk of losing their livelihoods. Most importantly, they didn't have the money to pay the nobleman, which put them in severe danger.

They shared their plight with the Alter Rebbe and asked for his blessing for rain. However, the Rebbe remained silent. He did not answer them at all. Surprised, they left his room in tears, where they met the Rebbe's grandson, the Tzemach Tzedek. When he heard what had transpired, he advised them to go back into the Rebbe's room and say to him, "If you have the ability to help us and you choose not to, you are cruel. And if you do not have the ability to help us, why did you agree to be a leader for the Jewish people?"

Having no better option, they took his advice. They reentered the Rebbe's room and repeated the Tzemach Tzedek's words. Hearing what they said, the Alter Rebbe became emotional; he leaned his head on his hand and meditated for some time. After a short while, he looked up, blessed the poor Jews, and told them to go on their way. Everything would work out.

As they left the Rebbe's room, the skies darkened, and within a short time, rain came pouring down from the heavens. The floods were so severe that they could not return home for three days (Likutei Sipurim by Rabbi Perlov, pg. 101).

Later, the Tzemach Tzedek explained that his advice was based on stories of our sages regarding droughts that are mentioned in the Talmud. In Tractate Taanis, there is a long discussion about the sages and how they dealt with droughts. We are all familiar with the famous prayer of Avinu Malkeinu, which we recite during the high Holidays. This prayer was actually born during a drought.

The Talmud relates that there was a terrible drought in the Land of

Israel, and a national fast day was declared. Everyone gathered in the synagogues. Rabbi Eliezer recited 24 blessings, but his prayers were not answered. Then, Rabbi Akiva came up to the podium and recited the Avinu Malkeinu prayer, "Our Father, our King, we have no King but You; Our Father, our King, have mercy on us for your sake." Suddenly, clouds gathered and rain began to fall. Seeing the power of his prayer, the sages inserted it into the High Holidays liturgy.

Unfortunately, it wasn't the only time that the people of Israel suffered from a drought. In the same Talmudic discussion, they write about a drought that took place in the days of Rabbi Yehuda Nesi'ah, the grandson of the famous Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi. He also declared a fast and held prayer services, but the skies remained clear.

He was very disappointed; "Look at the difference between the Prophet Shmuel and Yehuda ben Gamliel (himself)," he said. The Tanach tell us that when the people of Israel ask the Prophet Shmuel to appoint a king for them, he was very opposed to the idea, and to prove his point he brought rainfall in middle of the summer. Yet here, Rabbi Yehuda Nesiah couldn't bring rainfall in middle of the winter!

"Woe to the generation," he said, "that is stuck with this leadership; woe to him in whose days this has occurred."

He was terribly upset, and then suddenly, it began to rain (Taanis 24a).

The Talmud relates a similar story about Rabbi Nachman, a Talmudic rabbi in Babylon. During a drought, he declared a fast and gathered everyone for prayers, to no avail. Turning to the crowd, he announced, "Take Nachman and throw him to the ground," intimating that he was unworthy of leadership. At that moment, after expressing his anger and frustration, it suddenly began to rain.

There is one more example:

Rabbi Papa, one of the great Babylonian rabbis, also declared a fast during a drought. Weak from hunger, he ate a spoonful of porridge and began to pray, but no rain fell. A fellow rabbi mocked him for eating while everyone was fasting; “Perhaps if you eat another spoonful of porridge, rain will finally come.” Rabbi Papa felt embarrassed and upset, and then again, rain began to fall.

Becoming Worthy

Why did the rainfall come specifically when they got upset?

A chossid once came to Lubavitch to seek a blessing for his ailing wife. The Rebbe Maharash had passed away a short time earlier, leaving two sons in their early twenties — Rabbi Zalman Aharon, the older one, and the Rebbe Rashab, who was younger. The chossid entered the room of the Rebbe Rashab and told him that he had come to receive a blessing for his ill wife.

To his shock, the Rebbe Rashab simply responded, “I’m sorry, I can’t help you.”

Leaving his room in tears, the chossid met the older brother, Reb Zalman Aharon, who asked him why he was crying. He shared what had happened a moment earlier, and Reb Zalman Aharon immediately entered his brother’s room. “A Jew asks for your blessing and you reject him to the point that he leaves in tears?!” The Rebbe Rashab called the chossid back and gave him his blessing. Within a short time, his wife recovered.

When the Rebbe repeated this story, he asked the following question: If the Rebbe Rashab had the necessary spiritual powers to give the blessing, why did he withhold it in the first place? And if he didn’t have the power to help, why didn’t he at least offer some words of encouragement?

Rather, the Rebbe explained, when the fellow had first entered his

room, he was not spiritually receptive to the blessing; he didn't have the right vessel to receive it. But after being rejected by the Rebbe, something broke inside him, and he poured his heart out to G-d for salvation. Then, he became worthy of the blessing (Lekutei Sichos 15 pg. 126).

The same concept applies to the stories of the Talmud. The rain fell specifically after the tzaddik became upset — and that is what the Tzemach Tzedek attempted to do with the Alter Rebbe as well.

Perhaps this is the secret of the curses in this week's Torah portion. The Torah begins with wonderful blessings which G-d promises the Jewish people. But sometimes, we are so full of ourselves that we become unworthy of His blessings. Hearing those curses every once in a while, brings us to a more humble place. We remember who we are and what we are worth, and we then become worthy receptacles for G-d's abundant blessings.

Good Shabbos.