

# “Let the year end and its curses”

Parasha Ki Tavo 5779

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Ki Tavo starts off unassuming, but turns to a lengthy litany of curses which will befall the Jews should they abandon the ways of the Torah. This section is referred to as the תוכחה - curses, and has been frightening Jews ever since it was written.

Now interestingly enough, though there was a lot of flexibility in ancient times around what Torah portions were read at what times, unlike our carefully choreographed and universal breaks used nowadays, this section must always be read before Rosh Hashana. The Talmud tells us a few principles for the division of the Torah portions:

תניא, רבי שמעון בן אלעזר אומר: עזרא תיקן להן לישראל שיהו קורין קללות שבתורת כהנים קודם עצרת, ושבמשנה תורה קודם ראש השנה. מאי טעמא? אמר אביי ואיתימא ריש לקיש: כדי שתכלה השנה וקללותיה

Ezra enacted for the Jewish people that they should read the portion of the curses that are recorded in Leviticus before *Shavuot* and the portion of the curses that are recorded in Deuteronomy before Rosh HaShana. The Gemara asks: What is the reason for this? Abaye said, and some say that it was Reish Lakish who said: In order that the year may conclude together with its curses.

So the section of the curses must always be before Rosh Hashana. But what curses are we referring to? This is the subject of a debate between Rabbeinu Nissim and Tosafot. Rabbeinu Nissim interpreted this passage to mean that Ki Tavo as well as Nitzavim, next week's parsha must both be read before Rosh Hashana. While Tosafot understands that only Ki Tavo is what must be read before Rosh Hashana. There are problems with either interpretations. According to Rabbeinu Nissim, we must wonder how could you refer to Nitzavim as the curses, when those curses seem of a lesser caliber than the full curses we read this morning?

But according to Tosafot we have another problem: this is not the week before Rosh Hashana? For those who are calendrically challenged we still have another Shabbat before Rosh Hashana, so Ki Tavo is not read before Rosh Hashana, as the Talmud demands? Tosafot explains that we read the curses “before,” but not directly before, not too close to Rosh Hashana, so we have a week break between the curses and the new year.

Be that as it may be, the Talmud offers us an explanation for this connection between curses and the end of the year: “let the year and its curses come to an end.” This phrase has bothered me since early in my coming across it. The implication seems to be that next year there will be no curses, only blessing. The curses will end in time for a new year of blessing to begin. This certainly seems the implication of the famous poetic addition, at the end of the Achat Ketanah piyut, to this phrase: תכלה השנה וקללותיה תכל שנה וברכותיה - Let the year end and its curses, let the year begin and its blessings.

But is there a year without curses? Has anyone ever heard of such a thing? No curses at all, for everyone? More significantly, we will be reading this same passage at the end of next year and the year after that and so forth. So every year we express the hope that the year end and with it the curses, all while knowing that next year we

will do the exact same thing! What sort of hope is that if we know in advance that next year will need the same prayer at the end of it?

In many ways this process mimics the process of the High Holiday season. We talk about repentance and improvement, all the while knowing that next year we will also be discussing repentance and improvement again. There is no hope as humans that we could be perfect, and so we constantly try to grow. But still, what does it mean to pledge to be better, when every year we make the same pledge, knowing next year we'll make it again?

It seems to me there's another implication to this phrase: "let the year end with its curses," which is that it is simply a fact. The year is ending and with it whatever curses happened this year. Whatever frustrations and challenges we had this year are ending in another week in a half, and we will move on from there. The new year will likely bring new challenges and suffering and curses and frustrations, but this year is ending, and we have some closure for what has happened this year.

We discuss changing and growing a lot this time of year, but we sometimes forget there is also closure at the end of the year. We each had situations which didn't go our way this year, instances we responded in ways we regret. But the year is ending, and we can now move on to a new year and that brings the opportunity of fresh beginnings and moving beyond our failings of this past year. It is not to say what the new year will bring or that it will be all good, but it will certainly be new.

To live means to grow, but it also means we move beyond certain difficulties. Every year we grow as people, and at the end of the year we have a chance to move on from some of the difficulties we have experienced. Let this year end, and let us recognize with it the improvement we have made, how we are better than we were last year, how we have learned more. The new year will have new ways to grow, and the High Holidays offer a powerful opportunity for introspection, but we may also take pride in what we have accomplished and successfully resolved this past year.