

Parsha *Ki Tavo* is often considered scary, because of all the curses it contains. According to *Shulchan Aruch*, *Ki Tavo* is one of the four parshiyot, parts of which we read in a low voice. Such passages contain either curses or some unsightly actions of the Israelites during their wanderings in the desert. But at the same time, it is also one of the nicest parshiyot, because it also has some of the most bountiful and attractive blessings in the whole Bible, which G-d promises to bestow on the Children of Israel if we keep G-d's commandments.

A particular feature of *Ki Tavo* that I find striking is that the curses follow immediately on the heels of the blessings. No intermission. No time to mosey over to the buffet to grab a mimosa and some canapes. The parsha seems to go from a lovefest straight to a paroxysm of wrath. Why is this significant?

The more we study the Bible and the Jewish liturgy, the more we realize that the relationship between Israel and our God is not neutral. It is often described in terms of a relationship between lovers, or husband and wife. During every Kabbalat Shabbat we sing about our yearning for G-d:

Yaruts avdekha k'mo ayal...

Like a deer Your servant will run

And fall prostrate before Your beauty.

To him Your love is sweeter

Than honey from the comb, than any taste.

And then there is the incredibly beautiful, crazy, tantalizing *Song of Songs*. I have to rely on the English translation for my reading of the scripture, and I have the Orthodox Stone edition of the Tanakh, and I tell you, they had no idea what to do with that one when it came to translating it. Euphemisms, circumlocutions and embarrassed reinterpretations all around.

There seems to be a darker side to the relationship as well. Speaking of alien gods, Hashem says to the Children of Israel in Parsha *Yitro*, "You shall not prostrate yourself to them nor worship them, for I, Hashem your God, am a jealous God." And what prophetic deprecation in the whole Bible is more withering than those in Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Hosea, which compare the errant Israel to an unfaithful wife?

We see the picture of a highly charged, libidinous relationship, a relationship that sends sparks flying, one that is capable of bringing the participants up to the highest happiness and down to deep despair.

And this takes us to the next question: can you really hate someone you love very much? If you really love somebody, you may feel that this person becomes like a part of you, and you expect someone you love to be animated by the same spirit and motivated by the same mind as you. It is so much easier to take rejection and opposition from someone about whom you really don't care, but if someone you love does that to you, it feels as if one of your own limbs has forsaken you.

These complex emotions lie at the base of the comparison of our relationship with G-d to those relationships that we have with our loved ones on Earth. So could it be that when we forsake or defy G-d, He, like a spurned lover, rounds on us with every punishment He's got? Because, after all, like in some tumultuous relationships, from the blessings to the curses of *Ki Tavo* there is no more than one step?

But this is where, I'm afraid, the comparison between human and divine relationships emphatically ends. Hashem's relationship with us can be, at various times, an amazing, beautiful, satisfying, inspiring, frustrating, or scary relationship, but it is NOT an abusive or neglectful relationship. We may, in our ignorance or pride, neglect, or even defy G-d, but G-d would never harm or abandon us.

Deep in Babylonian exile, Ezekiel saw the famous vision of the Merkava, a heavenly chariot on which G-d rides. Scholars interpret this vision to mean that G-d has followed the Jews into their exile, for the first time in the Bible acquiring a set of wheels, in order not to abandon His people in adversity. Instead of gloating over the plight of His errant people, Hashem instead goes into exile with us and supports us. This, in my opinion, also shows that the exile itself and the trials accompanying it were not G-d's work in the first place.

Because G-d is not petty and is capable of infinite love. In the specific situation we are discussing, we must know that G-d will not purposely abuse us or take revenge on us, but in this context we can, nevertheless, do ourselves some significant harm.

When we chose to turn away from Hashem, to pervert justice, to violate the commandments, to worship the present-day idols of self-elevation and self-gratification, of success, money, and shiny technological gadgets, which are the idols not of wood and stone, but of plastic, metal and glass, we do not automatically incur divine punishment. This is not an action-reaction situation. Rather, by alienating from G-d, all we do is spiritually disfigure ourselves. If Hashem is the source of all that is good, just and light in this world, by alienating from Him we plunge ourselves into evil, injustice and darkness. Whether it is spiritual or physical, alienation from G-d stunts our growth and brings suffering. This, I think, is the true meaning of the curses in *Ki Tavo*, and also the reason why they are juxtaposed so closely and contrasted with the blessings, which represent harmony with Hashem and the happiness accompanying it.

Therefore, even while reading the scary verses in *Ki Tavo*, which cannot fail to remind us of the painful times in our history, distant and recent, we should still feel confidence in Hashem's unfailing love and support and in His unbreakable covenant with us. Likewise, maybe in our personal relationships, too, we should try to emulate G-d to some extent and, even if we sometimes don't see eye-to-eye with our loved ones, or feel frustrated with them, maybe we should go light on the curses. Shabbat shalom!