

Ki Thavo

Spirituality, Survival, and the Individual Jew

In the *Torah* portion *Ki Savo* we learn about the curses that will come upon the Jewish people if we do not observe the laws of the *Torah*. This is the second time that curses are mentioned in the *Torah*. The first time is in the *Torah* portion *Bechukosai*, which is the last *Torah* portion in the *Book of Vayikra*. There is a difference, though, between the curses that are mentioned in *Vayikra* and the curses that are mentioned in this *Torah* portion. The curses that are mentioned in *Vayikra* are mentioned in the plural. They refer to the whole people, and the curses that are mentioned in this week's *Torah* portion are in the singular and are directed toward the individual. The curses that are mentioned in *Vayikra* are authored by G-d, while these curses are authored by Moshe and confirmed by G-d. Also in the *Torah* portion *Vayikra* the curses there have a happy ending. It speaks about the Jewish people going back to the land, etc. The curses that are mentioned in this *Torah* portion have no happy ending. It just says, "And G-d will return you to Egypt in boats in the way which I have told you that you will not continue anymore to see and you will be sold there to your enemies as slaves and maidservants and nobody will even want to buy you." Why is it that we have these two different curses? What are they teaching us? Also, the curses in the *Book of Vayikra* are only half the curses that are in this *Torah* portion. In this *Torah* portion we have 98 or 99 curses, depending upon your count, and in the *Torah* portion *Bechukosai* we have 49.

If we look here at this *Torah* portion, we will see that the curses are bracketed by, first of all, the bringing of the first fruits and a special declaration made at that time. This declaration speaks about Jewish history. It does not say anything basically about the fruits until the very end. It talks about how an Aramaen tried to destroy my father, and he went down to Egypt, and he dwelled there few in number, etc., which is actually the basis for the *Haggadah*.

We also learn how we have to make sure that we pay up all our charitable obligations every third year and make a special declaration confirming this fact. We also learn about a special ceremony in which half the tribes stood on one mountain and half the tribe stood on another mountain

where they were to say, "Cursed be anybody who moves the border of his friend." "Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind person in the path," etc. These are all things that are easy to do and nobody can really tell what your intent was. Then we go into the blessings which will overtake us if we deserve the *Torah* and then we go into the 99 curses. At the end of the curses we learn how the Jewish people wander in the desert for 40 years and how G-d made sure that their clothes did not wear out and their shoes did not wear, how they did not eat bread or drink wine but, instead, G-d gave them manna. Why is it that we bracket the curses with these things?

Perhaps we can understand this bracketing if we look at the blessings. When we talk about the blessings in this *Torah* portion, it says, "And they will come upon you all these blessings and they will overtake you." That is a strange word to use, and they will "overtake" you. After all, usually we pursue blessings. What does it mean that they are going to overtake you? The rabbis say that what this means is that the Jewish people are going to have to be a blessing to the world whether we want to or not. It says, "I am going to command you today and G-d, your G-d, is going to make you high over all the nations of the world." The Jewish people are always going to be in the forefront of world history. We are going to be looked at continually. We are either going to be looked at with hatred or with admiration, but we are always going to be in the picture. We can see that this is true today. In Japan where there are almost no Jews, there is a large anti-Semitic movement. There is also a large pro-Jewish movement. Books on Jews sell like hotcakes in Japan. We know that this is also true in eastern Europe where there are hardly any Jews left anymore because of the Holocaust. The image of the Jew takes a huge place in the literature of those people. Jews have always been in the forefront of history. Cicero and all the authors of the Roman Empire talked about us. We were talked about all through human history. And we Jews have always had some part to play in history. Even in Spain after we were kicked out in 1492, the image of the Jew had a great hold on the imagination of the people, even though no Jews were allowed to live in Spain for over 450 years. We know that when it comes to spirituality, we Jews must set the tone, in effect, for the world. We Jews have no choice. We must be true to our own self.

This is what differentiates the curses found in *Vayikra* from the curses

found here. G-d made a promise to Moshe Rabbeinu that the Jewish people would never be destroyed and in the curses that are found in *Vayikra*, those first 49 curses, G-d tells the Jewish people that the Jewish people, themselves, will always be around. There will always be some saving remnant. G-d needs the Jewish people to exist, so to speak, to demonstrate His presence in the world and to proclaim that everyone needs spirituality. Not all individual Jews are worthy of that charge, but the nations of the world know that there is something special about the Jewish people, and they either hate us for it or they admire us for it, but they know that we are there. This does not hold true, though, for individual Jews. Individual Jews will not necessarily be Jewish. They can in the course of a few generations disappear completely. They can disappear in many, many ways. We know that this is true. We know that, according to some historians, if all the Jews and their progeny in America would have stayed Jews, there would be 60 million Jews in America. We know that at the time of the Roman Empire, there were as many Jews, 13 million, as there are living right now. In fact, whether we as individual Jews will remain Jews or not is dependent upon us. When it comes to the Jewish people, they will always exist, although the Jewish people will suffer losses. G-d has assured us of that. G-d will make sure that the Jewish people always exist.

That's why in the *Torah* portion *Bechukosai* in *Vayikra* we learn about redemption because no matter what bad things happen to the Jewish people as a people we will be redeemed. We hope that we are living in the era when the Jewish people are being redeemed. Individual Jews can disappear in the course of time. The only thing that really is going to allow individual Jews to continue is if they will assert once again their spirituality. That they can only do if they feel that they want to be connected to G-d and to their people. Spirituality comes when we know that we are connected to G-d, to our people and to our family. The basis of spirituality is connectedness. One of the reasons why many Jews today cannot relate to Judaism is because in institutions today, from the ultra orthodox to the ultra reform, there is a great lack of a feeling of connectedness. We hardly ever hear G-d mentioned in many of these religious institutions. The whole driving force behind Judaism is that we should try to get close to G-d. We get close to G-d by getting close to our family and close to our people, etc.

That is why these curses are bracketed the way they are. We know that when a person made his declaration of the first fruit, he was trying to get close to G-d by getting close to his people. Therefore, he went through the history of the Jewish people. We know that in order to be close to our people, to each other, we must have given our charity obligations. We also had to make sure that we did not cheat anybody even though we could have gotten away with it and, therefore, we also went through the ceremony at Mt. Gerisin and Mt. Abel.

At the end of this *Torah* portion, too, we learn how G-d says, "And I have led you for 40 years in the desert and your clothes did not wear out and your shoes did not wear out and bread you did not eat and beer you did not drink in order that you should know I am the Lord your G-d." What does that mean? It means that G-d wanted the Jews after they left Egypt to concentrate on spirituality, on things of the spirit and, therefore, He made it easy for them. They did not have to worry about their clothes or food or drink. G-d told them that He would provide everything for them except the one thing and that one thing was spirituality. They would have to do that for themselves. If they wanted to be Jews, they would have to feel this need to be spiritual. They would have to feel this need to want to get close to G-d, and we get close to G-d by getting close to man and to our families. This is what this *Torah* portion is teaching us. We know that in the United States today there is a great falling off from Judaism. There is so much assimilation that even our federations are beginning to realize that unless there is Jewish spirituality Judaism will die in America. The Jewish community is not an ethnic community. It is a religious community and, therefore, spirituality is the key to Jewish survival. We know that many times people will use religious institutions for their own purposes and this is not actually so bad because the first stage of getting close to G-d is getting close to man, but it can only be a first stage. Our religious institutions must not be just social clubs, they must be sources of spirituality. It is also spirituality which can assure Jewish continuity.

I am reminded of the story they tell about Goldberg who went to *shul* three times a day. His friend told him, "Mr. Goldberg, you must be a religious man. You go to *shul* three times a day." He said that he was not religious so they asked him why he went to *shul* so often. He said, "Well,

you see Ginsberg is religious. He comes to *shul* to talk to G-d and I go to *shul* to talk to Ginsberg.”

We know that this is why some people come to *shul*, to be connected to other people. This is the first step to being connected to G-d. G-d is telling us in this portion that we, as individual Jews, if we want to stay Jews, make sure to develop our spirituality. This means that we must frequent religious institutions. This will enable us better to connect with our fellow Jews and with Him. We all know that when we come to *shul* and pray to G-d, it is much easier to feel G-d's presence than if we pray at home, although it is not impossible. By praying together, we are drawn closer to each other and much closer to G-d. Let us all hope and pray that we will realize that we all need Jewish spirituality. What's more, G-d has assured us that we must have it if we are to survive as Jews, as He said in the *Book of Ezekiel*. “And I will rule over you with power and force,” which means that if we drop our Jewish spirituality, if we do not want to be a source of spirituality for the rest of the world, then we will stop being Jews and we will no longer be worthy as individuals to be redeemed. True, a remnant of the Jewish people will survive because of persecution, etc., but many will be lost. Let us all hope and pray that all of us will want to stay Jews so that we will form strong spiritual communities so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.