

Parashat Ki Tavo 5780

This Shabbat's Torah portion continues to bring us to the brink of entering the Land of Israel with Moses' addressing the people. It contains many blessings and curses that will occur depending on how we live in the Land.

I think most modern people feel uncomfortable regarding the list of curses. Though our sages never would explicitly negate something in the Torah, they developed a custom of chanting the blessings in a normal voice, but chanting the curses in a subdued voice – implying either that they too were uncomfortable with them or that they found them upsetting.

Throughout the tradition there are two ways that our Sages, following the Torah, speak of relating to G!d – one is through the love of G!d, the other either awe or fear of G!d. I've always been uncomfortable with the image of fear of G!d, I feel like it implies a kind of infantilizing of people i.e. that only fear will keep them from living a life that is corrupt. Realistically, maybe that's true for some people – only fear of punishment stops them from doing negative things – and sometimes even fear of punishment is clearly not a strong enough deterrent because there's still plenty of criminal behavior in the world.

I think for those of us who don't require a fear of punishment to stop us from criminal or base activity, it's hard to understand how some people can live with themselves and cheat other people or harm other people. I know that sounds very naïve because it's not that uncommon behavior, but I still can't help but wonder how people can look at themselves in the mirror and not feel great remorse for harming other people. Do they somehow convince themselves that what they did was justified or alright? Or do they simply have some loose screws?

Earlier I said that there were two ways in which our sages and the Torah speak of relating to G!d: love and awe or fear. Why do I say awe or fear? Because the same Hebrew word, *Yirah*, can imply either awe or fear. We have a very obvious expression of loving G!d. The *V'ahavta* (the first paragraph of the *Sh'ma*) which begins with the words: “You shall love the Eternal One your G!d with all your heart, all your soul and all your might.” So that way of relating to G!d is clearly emphasized by the recitation of the *Sh'ma/V'ahavta* twice daily (in the morning and in the evening). To me there's no comparison between love, awe, or fear.

There are different ways that people can be motivated to do something or refrain from doing something. For example, if you love someone, you want to do things for them. If you fear

someone you want to avoid incurring their wrath. If you feel awe for someone or something, it inspires a type of reverence and behavior in response to that overwhelming feeling.

As an aside, personally I don't like to tell people what to think or give answers, I prefer to raise questions and provide food for thought. So I ask myself why is the *V'ahavta* such a central prayer or declaration?

At the same time I have to ask how often do we naturally do what is best for us and act selflessly? For example, we all went to school. Did we study out of pure love of the subjects or were we motivated by concern for not doing badly or for winning the approval of our parents (and teachers) or avoiding the criticism of our parents (and teachers)? It seems to me that only in the more advanced years of school are students more likely to study for the love of the subjects, for example in college or especially in graduate school.

Our sages discuss in the Talmud which is a higher level of activity doing a mitzvah out of love or out of being commanded.

There's a very interesting opinion that's cited that claims it's a higher level to do a mitzvah because we're commanded than because of our love for the mitzvah. That seems counter-intuitive. But the argument went as follows: It's easy to do something from our own desire. Furthermore most people react against being told what to do – which makes them not want to do something they're commanded to do. So a person who can overcome that impulse to react against what they're commanded to do, is more praiseworthy.

Another way of looking at the blessings and curses in this Shabbat's Torah portion is perceiving them as natural consequences of our actions, what's called "karma" in another tradition. We tend to be much more comfortable with that than with an external Divine judge rewarding and punishing us.

Personally, I'm very fond of the statement in Pirkei Avot that says the reward of a mitzvah is the mitzvah and the emphasis in our tradition of the greatness of Torah lishma, Torah for its own sake, rather than for the sake of a reward.

It says further in Pirkei Avot, don't be like those who serve the ruler in order to receive a reward, rather be like those who serve the ruler not in order to receive any reward: and it ends with the words: "may the *yirah* of heaven be upon you. I think that in this context the word *yirah* makes sense as meaning "awe" rather than "fear."

If we look at the prayers that the rabbis created in our liturgy, they emphasize the attitude of love of G!d, rather than fear and similarly of G!d's love of us. The *Sh'ma/V'ahavta* in both the evening and the morning prayers is preceded with the declaration that G!d loves us. In the evening service the paragraph that precedes the *Sh'ma* is *ahavat olam* meaning that G!d loves us with an eternal love ("eternal love" is the meaning of *ahavat olam*). In the morning service the prayer that precedes the recitation of the *Sh'ma* begins with *ahava raba* (great love) G!d has loved us. And the last line in both *ahavat olam* and *ahava rabba* reiterates the declaration of G!d's love for us. Clearly the rabbis wanted to emphasize that orientation rather than an orientation of "fear" towards G!d.

One more point. I think that the orientation of awe towards G!d is an expression of the desire to experience G!d's Presence in our lives – i.e. that G!d's Presence be an actual experience, rather than a proclamation of faith. That experience of G!d's Presence, what is referred to in Biblical literature as G!d's *Kavod* or in Rabbinic literature as G!d's *Shekhina* is an experience of awe and on occasion an awe that is so overwhelming that it may elicit a feeling of fear, but not a fear of punishment, but a fear or awe of being witness to something so overwhelming powerful. That experience also elicits love, not the love of one who fears punishment, but the love of one who senses something so magnificent. Throughout our prayer book we find verses that attempt to articulate that sense. One of my own personal favorites comes from the book of Isaiah and is repeated in the *kedusha* of the *Amidah* and precedes the morning recitation of the *Sh'ma* by a few paragraphs: *Kadosh, kadosh, kadosh.....m'lo khawl ha'aretz k'vodo* (that G!d's *Kavod*, G!d's Presence fills the entire world). Hopefully our spiritual practice can help attune us to that experience. Shabbat Shalom.