**KI TAVO-3**

**Third Portion of the Triennial Cycle**

**Devarim (Deuteronomy) 27.11 – 29-08**

(Hertz: 864-873; Plaut 1515-1537; Eitz Hayim 1146-1159)

Today’s parashah is the third portion of Ki Tavo in the triennial cycle of weekly Torah readings, but, to start, I want to clarify some things about the triennial cycle. To be truthful, I am just delaying from dealing with Ki Tavo, today’s portion of which is one of the most difficult, almost horrible, of all Torah readings.

A lot of what follows about the triennial cycle will be known to some members of Adath Shalom, so I apologize in advance for boring you. For others in the congregation, let’s discuss the triennial cycle, which defines our weekly readings from the Torah. It is no surprise that the custom—now the requirement—to read from the Torah every Shabbat is as old as the rabbinic period, which began after the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 CE. The reading reflects the importance to Judaism not just of Torah itself but the ability to read and scholarship from the earliest days. Maybe it even reflects an early effort toward synagogue democracy because nothing says that it must be a rabbi who reads the Torah or chants the Haftarah.

What is a surprise is that the triennial cycle is also as old as rabbinic Judaism. Accord-ing to Rabbi Joel Roth,[[1]](#footnote-1) until about the 12th century CE, “the Jewish community of Israel completed the Torah only once in three years, while the Babylonian community com-pleted it every year.” I have never heard any explanation as to why the choice for three years. Perhaps it was similar to what a Moslem friend told me about why they pray five times a day: *Six would have been too many but four would have been too few*. What-ever the reason, after the 12th century, “the universal Jewish custom was to complete the reading of the Torah every year.” Then, in the late 20th century, the Conservative Movement resurrected the triennial pattern of readings. However, it was not easy.

In 1987, an initial paper was submitted by Rabbi Lionel Moses to the Conservative Movement’s Committee on Jewish Law and Standards (CJLS). It argued that the only halakhically acceptable triennial cycle was one in which the Torah is read consecutively over three years—the first section one week; the second portion the next week; and so on. One year later, CJLS accepted a second proposal, this one from Rabbi Richard Eisenberg, for a triennial cycle that follows the annual cycle by reading only a third of the annual reading each year. I won’t elaborate his proposal because you are all familiar with it. It does have the advantage of keeping congregations such as Adath Shalom in line with other congregations, including all Orthodox congregations. Other triennial systems have also been accepted, as for example, by reading one third on Shabbat, one third on Monday, and one third on Thursday, each of the days for which there is Torah reading.in traditional synagogues. However, Eisenberg also prepared a week-by-week division of the triennial readings into seven aliyot, something that takes account of lots of halakhic rules. That is what we follow today and that, with minor adjustments, appears on the USCJ Jewish calendar.

I have now taken up one-third of the space that I allow for a d’var, so I must return to Ki Tavo. Our Parashah is the third time that curses and blessings appear in the Torah. The first time is in Parashat *Mishpatim* (Shemot 23:20 *ff*), but it often described as a not- very-frightening homily. The second time is Chapter 27 of *B’hukkotai*, which concludes the book of *Vayikra* (*Leviticus*). *Eitz Hayim* considers the curses and blessings in B’huk-kotai as an epilogue to the Holiness Code, which immediately precedes it. Hertz is lower key. He labels the curses and blessings, “The Wages of Disobedience,” (543; 26:14-39), and notes that, “They are arranged in five groups of increasing severity—sickness and defeat, famine, wild beasts, siege, and exile.” However, Hertz does not comment on the curses and blessings from a general perspective. His broad comments in Ki Tavo are restricted to two paragraphs as a note (866-67 in which he writes that, “the denun-ciations surpass anything in the oratory or poetry of the whole world” except for “the real horrors of Jewish history” (note 867).

Ki Tavo is longer than its two predecessors in the Torah. It also differs from them in being shouted by Levites from a pair of mountaintops, along with strong “amens” by the Israelites who are still organized by tribes. Further, it differs in being almost totally unfor-giving with no promise of eventual redemption. The most that is offered to the young nation of Israel are the final six verses of the Parashah (26:1 - 26:6; 1158), which, according to *Eitz Hayim*, “allow this parashah to end on a favourable note, rather than leave us with bone-chilling curses reverberating in our souls.” Compare that with God’s words near the end of B’hukkotai (26:44), “And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them /nor will I/ break their My covenant with them; for I am the lord their God.”

That statement should indicate why I mentioned at the start of this d’var that I hesitated to deal with curses and blessings. I cannot offer any sort of overall perspective, so I will restrict my comments to selected aspects of those curses and blessings in Ki Tavo, and, when relevant, the two earlier presentations.

Most scholars recognize that the curses and blessings in each of their three appearances come immediately after a presentation of laws and rituals that the Jewish people should follow. Thus, the blessings and curses in Ki Tavo come just after Moses’ final oration, which presents what must feel to listeners as a staggering number of such things to remember. [[2]](#footnote-2) And it is followed in Chapter 28 by what the late Rabbi Plaut calls “an awesome array of curses that dwarf the catalogue of blessings preceding them.” Absolutely unique to Ki Tavo is that elaborate formal ceremony that Moses and the elders of Israel proclaim to commemorate Israel crossing “the Jordan into the land that the Lord your God is giving you (27:2).” That ceremony makes it clear that (com-mentary to 26:16–19), “beyond being mere items of a legal code, the blessings and the curses are the very basis of the relationship that God and the people have established.” Hertz speculates that the wording of 26:16-19 is, “probably a technical legal term by which either of the two parties to a covenant made the other utter a declaration of his obligation under it.” The ceremony also emphasizes that, as the nation of Israel enters the promised land, its purpose is to declare that their tenure is (863), “by virtue of their covenant with God, and on the condition of their own faithfulness thereto.”

This is the perfect point to quote from Ilana Kurshan’s commentary on Ki Tavo in *Torah Sparks*,[[3]](#footnote-3) which is published by the Conservative Yeshiva of Jerusalem.

At first glance, the renewal of the covenant seems superfluous. All the curses . . . reiterate commandments that were stated earlier in the Torah. Some overlap with the Ten Commandments, like the prohibition on idolatry and on cursing one’s parents. Others hearken back to the holiness code in Leviticus, like the prohibition on causing harm to a blind person . . . But . . . the prohibitions appear with a slightly different twist here because they all relate to sins committed in secret.

The same point is made, and perhaps even more strongly by Rabbi Samuel Rafael Hirsch, a leading Orthodox rabbi in Germany of the 19th century, “All blessing is denied to him who outwardly plays the pious man devoted to God, but in secret denies the exclusive existence of One God and His rule; who outwardly is respectful to his parents but inwardly considers himself vastly superior o them; who in the eyes of men preserves the reputation of an honest man but, where it is unobserved, does not hesitate to injure the rights of his neighbor to his own advantage; who” and so on for more than a paragraph (Plaut chumash, 1519). It is as if pretending to have secrets from an all-knowing God is the prime sin, one that each of us must fight against no matter what the cost in our daily life.

Once again, quoting from Ilana Kurshan:

Rashi explains that human beings cannot punish one another for sins that no one knows about; only God can know about the sins committed in secret, when no one else is watching. And thus the “hidden things”– the sins committed in secret—are left to God to punish, while human beings must adjudicate matters that are publicly known. The curses recited on the mountain relate to the hidden things as a way of warning the people that they cannot escape sins committed in secret. Even those matters about which no human judge can ever know will be redressed nonetheless.

In conclusion, the blessings are so much weaker than the curses that few authors comment very much on them. Hertz does in a mild way by noting that the blessings can be divided into areas in the normal lives of people: offspring, crops, cattle, harvest, and daily bread—all part of an effort to personalize the blessings. However, everywhere in Ki Tavo, text that reviews blessings is followed by additional warnings of what will happen if the Israelites tend toward disobedience. God has it within His power to make Israel a holy nation with all that that implies in human and divine benefits (see 28:1-14). That takes up 14 verses of text. God also has the power to make their life a hell on earth (28:15-69). That takes 55 verses of text.

Why 14 verses on one side and 55 on the other? I do not understand, nor do I expect many of you to understand.

Shabbat shalom,

Addendum-1 for written presentation only

*The Encyclopedia of Judaism[[4]](#footnote-4)* reports that in the Talmudic period, blessings giving thanks to God were standardized and categorized. Indeed, the performance of every mitzvah had to be preceded by the appropriate blessing. On the other hand, cursing was forbidden, unless religiously motivated. Even then it was frowned upon, as indicated by following maxims (San. 49a):

Let yourself be cursed rather than curse someone else.

And this more colorful one (Ber 56a):

Rather the curse of Ahijah the Shulamite than the blessing of Balaam, the wicked.

Addendum-2 for written presentation only:

Another aspect of the curses and blessings that, at least to me, was not expected appears in *Eitz Hayim*’s commentary on Parashat B’Hukkotai (747):

Two major principles of biblical religion find expression in this epilogue: the concept of free will and the doctrine of reward and punishment. Choice is left to the people Israel and its leaders.

I accept the point and the principles, but I do not know how to carry discussion forward short of a whole d’var on free will or on reward and punishment.

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1. The dilemma of the triennial cycle (Fall 1998). *United Synagogue Review*, 15 and 18. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the immediate preceding d’var on 10 September 2020 on Ki Tetze.. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Torah Sparks for Ki Tavo (5782/2022), Jerusalem: Fuchsberg Jewish Center/Conservative Yeshiva.. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Geoffrey Wigoder, Editor in Chief (1989). *The Encyclopedia of Judaism.* New York: Macmillan Publishing/Jerusalem Publishing House. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)