

## **On Blessing, Pity and Idolatry**

*Parshat Ekev*

Mois Navon

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This week's Parsha begins with a Parsha Stuma – a single paragraph which encapsulates a conceptually coherent idea. As such, we expect the entire section to discuss one theme.

And it will be as a consequence of your listening to these judgments, and keeping them and doing them that God will keep the covenant and the mercy with you that he swore to your forefathers. And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; and he will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land, your corn, and your wine and your oil, the increase of your cattle and the breeds of your flock, in the land which he swore unto your fathers to give you. Blessed will you be above all peoples, there shall be no barren male or female among you or your cattle. And God will remove from you all sickness, and all the evil diseases of Egypt that you know he will not put on you but upon those that hate you. And you will destroy all the peoples that God, your God, gives you; your eye shall not pity them, and you shall not serve their gods, for that will be a snare unto you.

(Duet. 7:12-16)

### **Rewards v. Consequences**

To summarize, following due obedience to God's will, God, for His part, will fulfill the patriarchal covenant. The blessings are then enumerated in poetic detail and include all manner of goodness: physical health and well-being, economic prosperity, national security. These blessings are not to be taken as prizes for good behavior, but rather as the necessary outcome of our pledging allegiance to the covenant. Indeed, this is how Rambam (Hil. Tesh. 9:1) explains such rewards:

[God] has promised us in the Torah, that if we observe its behests joyously and cheerfully, and continually meditate on its wisdom, He will remove from us the obstacles that hinder us in its observance, such as sickness, war, famine, and other calamities; and will bestow upon us all material benefits which will strengthen our ability to fulfill the Law, such as plenty, peace, abundance of silver and gold. Thus we will not be engaged all our days in providing for our bodily needs, but will have the leisure to study wisdom and fulfill the commandments, and thus attain life in the World to Come.

By demonstrating our desire to fulfill God's will, He, for His part, does not pay us, but rather provides us with the correspondingly appropriate set of conditions ideally conducive for us to grow in fulfilling that will.

### **Doing v. Being Done For**

Thus, God blesses us with health, prosperity and security. But then the blessings in the last verse take an unexpected turn: "And you will destroy all the peoples that God, your God, gives you; your eye shall not pity them, and you shall not serve their gods, for that will be a snare unto you."

First of all, it is interesting to note that whereas all the previous blessings were phrased in terms of what God will do, here the blessing is framed in what we must do. Ibn Ezra (*ad. loc.*) and Ohr HaHayim (*ad. loc.*) explain that we have here a positive commandment, the neglect of which is the rejection of God's gift of the land of Israel. Nevertheless, in keeping with the theme of this *parsha stuma*, the mitzvah can also be seen to have a dimension of blessing.<sup>1</sup> That is, it is a blessing from God that **we** will destroy our enemies; and indeed R. Bachyeh (*ad. loc.*) reads it as such.

Thus, though we pray to God for help, ever careful not to fall into the trap of thinking, "My strength and the vigor of my hand has achieved for me this great victory" (Duet. 8:17), we must also be ever vigilant not to fall into the trap of thinking it best that God fight our battles while we sit frightened on the sidelines. That was the situation when the Jews left Egypt, "God will fight for you while you stay still" (Ex. 14:14), when the nation was in its infancy, so to speak. However, it is a far greater level of development, of maturity, to fight our own battles, ever mindful that we do so with God's blessing. Indeed, in the verses following the blessings in our Parsha, Moshe assuages Israel's possible<sup>2</sup> apprehension of not being able to fight the inhabitants of the land by explaining that God will fight for us; however, the battle itself is to be waged by the hand of Israel, "He will deliver their kings into your hand and **you** will annihilate their name..." (Duet. 7:24).<sup>3</sup>

In consonance to this, R. Haim MiVolozhin makes an astounding interpretation on the list of things the Mishna says will precede the advent of the Mashiach. The Mishna (Sotah 49b) lists a great many negative things that will befall that generation – insolence will increase, inflation will run out of control, the government will be heretical, meeting halls will be used for immorality, etc.. The Mishna then concludes: So what then can we rely on? Only upon our father in heaven. R. Haim MiVolozhin explains that this too is part of the negativity of the times!! That is, the feeling that there is nothing we can do to rectify our own situation in the world other than to cry out to heaven is a reversion back to that same infantile state we were in when we left Egypt. (Though, according to this Mishna, it may be inevitable, it is certainly not desirable).

## No Pity

Secondly, and even more strange than the blessing that we ourselves destroy the peoples that lay claim to our land,<sup>4</sup> is that we not take pity on them – "your eye shall not pity them." Though pity, translated by the commentators as "mercy" (*rachmanut*), is an essential characteristic in the religious personality, it is detrimental when applied to an external enemy. The Ohr HaHayim (Duet. 7:16) explains this part of the verse as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Indeed, Avi Ezer (on Ibn Ezra) explains that contextually we could view it as a blessing, but we must be careful to realize that it is not a simple blessing, a statement of permission, but rather an absolute command. My explanation of the blessing is not in the sense of a good wish, but rather in the sense of a gift, like in the preceding verses.

<sup>2</sup> See Rashi (Duet. 7:17).

<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, Chronicles II (20:17) does denote a case when the Jews are told that not only will God fight, but they are to not get involved. This appears to be a special case, in that the Jews are told that this is "not their battle."

<sup>4</sup> The verse refers to the Canaanite inhabitants of the land prior Yehoshua's conquest of the land, nevertheless, the verse serves as a precedent for any such conquest of the land of Israel by the Jewish people.

“Don’t Pity” – is like the saying in Mishle (12:10), “The mercy of the wicked is brutal” – meaning that this is not a good trait but a bad one, and to this it here warns opposite the good trait, for here in our verse the trait is only bad....

When fighting a war, the nation must be utterly convinced of its righteousness in wielding the brutal force necessary to win. This conviction is sometimes termed “moral clarity” without which the nation becomes mired in divisive arguments that sap the nation of its power and will to fight and win. When we get wound up in arguments based on “pity” and “mercy”, trying to “understand” the other side, we undermine or own cause.

This verse can be understood then as teaching that it is a blessing from God, a gift as great as physical health and material success, that the nation manifest the moral clarity, the moral conviction, the moral resolve to fight its sworn enemies swiftly, decisively – “without pity.”

### **Idol Worship**

Finally, the verse ends, “and you shall not serve their gods, for that will be a snare unto you.” The Ohr HaHayim writes:

The verse concludes as it does to explain that mercy (*rachmanut*) in this matter will give birth to the sense of idol worship, and that’s why it states, “for it is a snare to you”; the “it” [that snares] means “the other nation”, such that when you pity them you are being brutal toward yourself; or alternatively the “it” [that snares] is “mercy” for which we are commanded to not employ.

From here we learn that the very expression of pity towards the enemy nation is tantamount to idol worship! Though idol worship is normatively taken to be foreign religious, perhaps ceremonial, worship; it is seen here for it really is, an act which is the direct result of not accepting, aye rejecting, God’s authority.

Deeper insight concerning man’s internal conflict over executing a merciless war can be gleaned by studying the specific case of Shaul’s war against Amalek. Though the wars against Amalek, like the wars against the inhabitants of the land of Israel, have the explicit command to show no mercy, this command is implicit for all wars required by the Torah (*milbemet mitzvah*). Discussing the State of Israel’s perpetual status of being at war with the Arabs, R. Hershel Schachter writes that, “Israeli soldiers should shoot to kill when necessary and, as in times of war, may even punish or kill innocent Arabs when the situation calls for such action.”<sup>5</sup> To support this imperative he quotes the Maharal of Prague, who writes in his commentary Gur Aryeh to Parshat Vayishlach:

... Although the Torah reads, ‘when you approach a city to wage war against it, you shall greet them peacefully’ [first attempt to reach a peace agreement], this speaks of a city that did not harm us. But as regards those who attack the Jews, as Amalek did, even if only one of their members was responsible for this act, revenge may be exacted from the entire nation because he is one of them. Likewise regarding any war such as that waged against the nation of Midian, all of

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<sup>5</sup> “Land for Peace”, Journal of Halacha and Contemporary Society, Num XVI, Fall 1988, p. 75.

whom were attacked, despite the fact that not all were guilty of wrongdoing; and this is the nature of all wars.<sup>6</sup>

From here we learn that, despite the fact that the war against Amalek is unique,<sup>7</sup> the same rules of fighting mercilessly apply to all Israel's current wars. Consequently, we can, as mentioned, gain insight concerning man's internal conflict over executing a merciless war by studying Shaul's war against Amalek.

From the very opening words of our Parsha, "As a consequence of your listening these laws", we find a fundamental parallel in the narrative of Shaul's battle with Amalek, in that Shmuel exhorts him to "Listen to the voice of the words of God" (Sh. I 15:1). R. Hirsch (*ad. loc.*) notes that it doesn't say, "Listen to the words of God" but rather, "Listen to the **voice** of the words of God" – phraseology employed when "unconditional obedience, regardless of insight into the sense and purpose of the command, is required..."

Shmuel then commands Shaul, "Now go and smite Amalek, utterly destroy all that he has and have no pity upon him..." (Shmuel I 15:3). The prophet's words resoundingly echo the biblical command to show no pity when making war.<sup>8</sup> R. Hirsch emphasizes the complexity of the command:

We can at once see, ..., why especially here implicit obedience was called for... When we consider that all the teachings, all the laws of God are designed to educate Israel to the highest delicacy of feelings, to that disposition which acts with love to all our fellow creatures, and always puts itself in the position of its neighbor, then the command given here to Shaul must have appeared in the crassest possible manner in direct contradiction to all what is otherwise taught and striven for.

Correspondingly, the Gemara elaborates on King Shaul's internal dilemma:

R. Mani said: ... When the Holy one blessed be He, said to Shaul, "Now go and smite Amalek," he said: If the Torah orders the procedure of bringing an Eglah Arufa for the sake of killing one man, how much more [ought consideration be given] to all those people. And if people have sinned what have the animals done? If the adults have sinned, what then have the children done? Then a divine voice came forth and said, "Be not overly righteous!"

*Yoma 22b*

The Gemara is emphasizing the ethic that it is our duty to perform the will of God, even when it seems to rub against our sensibilities. For man's sensibilities cannot serve as a reliable moral meter. And so continues the Gemara: "And when Shaul told Doeg, 'Turn and smite the Cohanim' Then a divine voice came forth and said, 'Be not overly wicked!'" On this contrast of incidents Yalku Shimoni (Sh. I, rmz 121) made the infamous declaration, "He who is merciful at a time that demands brutality will in the end be brutal at a time that demands mercy."

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<sup>6</sup> Sifrei Maharal, vol. 1, p.186

<sup>7</sup> It is unique in the sense that it is an eternal war to blot out their existence.

<sup>8</sup> See Daat Mikra, R. Yehuda Kil, s.v. lo tahmol.

Upon being caught for not carrying out the command to destroy Amalek, Shaul offers to bring sacrifices in atonement. Shmuel (I 15:22-23) rebukes him with the following words: “Has the Lord as great a delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is like the sin of sorcery, and obstinacy is like the sin of idolatry (terafim).” R. Hirsh (*ad. loc.*) explains:

“Willful disobedience to the word of God is designated as “the sin of sorcery”, inasmuch as, by the act committed, it proves that some other power, whether this be one’s own passions, or one’s imagined better judgment, is conceded greater potency than the Will of God, just as the sorcerer professes to be able by some means to be able to make that Will accommodating to, subordinate to his own will.”

The blessing, or gift, that the people will not idol worship, is that they will not lose their moral compass of God and His Torah, that they will not be “ensnared” by the “idol worship” of the self. The idol worship here is really the ultimate idol worship, and that is worshipping one’s own definition of right and wrong in contradistinction to that of God.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, all the blessings mentioned in the Parsha’s initial Parsha Stuma are not prizes for good behavior, but rather the necessary result of our unwavering acceptance and application of His Torah on a national level. They are gifts bequeathed upon a nation that takes action, ever knowing from whence its help cometh (*me’ayin yavo ezri*). And finally, the blessing of destroying our enemies, without mercy, comes by reaching that ultimate level of relationship with the divine, whereby we put aside our own moral compass for that of God’s. (I would like to make clear: my point here is that morally we have no reason to act with mercy toward the belligerent aggression of our enemies; that being said, on a practical level, our army’s actions require the due metering of political and military considerations).

May we indeed merit these blessings and with them the Righteous Redeemer who will bring the whole world to its peaceful fulfillment.

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