

Beyond Threats: Teaching People How to Live

Parshat Ki Tavo 5769

By Rabbi Mark B Greenspan

This morning I'd like to try something different. Instead of a sermon, I'd like to share my own attempt at *Midrash* on our weekly Torah portion.

For those who may not be familiar with the term, *Midrash* is a tool that the sages used in interpreting the Bible. Someone said that *Midrash* is a 'story about a story;' it's an attempt to go beyond the text of the Bible as we try to think about what God really had in mind. Another way of thinking about *Midrash* is that it's what happens in the space between the words of the Bible. So much is left unsaid and unanswered in the Torah; *Midrash* is an attempt to 'fill in' the gaps.

So why do *Midrash* this morning? Each year when we get to *Parshat Ki Tavo*, I find myself struggling with what to do with these chapters. It's one of two weekly portions that we refer to as the *tokhehah*, the rebuke. Chapters 27 - 28 of Deuteronomy contain a detailed list of consequences that will take place depending on whether Israel obeys or disobeys the terms of the covenant with God. In no uncertain terms Moses tells the people what will happen to them. If the people obey God's commandments, God will bless them, their fields, and their cattle. Israel will defeat their enemies and they will be the envy of the world. The Torah portion then goes on to list the consequences of Israel's failure to obey God.

This list is longer than the blessings and far more vivid. Moses describes how Israel will be punished. Here are some examples: "The Lord will let loose calamity, panic, and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake." "The Lord will strike you with inflammation, with hemorrhoids; boil-scars and itch from which you will never recover!" "You will pay a bride price for a wife, and another shall enjoy her." "The Lord will drive you and the king you have set over you to a nation unknown to you or your ancestors..." And that's just the beginning. The curses and consequences in *Ki Tavo* is so terrible that the Torah reader is not supposed to read them too loudly or too slowly, and this *aliyah* is reserved for the Rabbi since no one in the congregation wants it!

Do you see my problem? First, the *tokhehah* suggests that God is a vindictive deity who strikes us down every time we do something wrong. It's hard to love such a God. And secondly, experience tells us that not only is this not nice, it's also not true. After all, sometimes bad things happen to good people and sometime bad people *literally* get away with murder. Troubled by this, the sages concluded that the ultimate reward and punishment would be granted in the world to come and not in this world. But it's hard not to conclude from the *tokhehah* that this passage isn't talking about punishments that are rooted in this world.

Now there's one other attempt to explain the *tokhehah* that I should mention before offering my *Midrashic* interpretation. Some people suggest that the curses in *Parshat Ki Tavo* are a 'deterrent;' they're supposed to scare us out of doing bad stuff. It's a little like the mother who threatens her children, "just wait till your father comes home..."

But this explanation is also problematic. First of all, if there is one rule that I've learned as a parent, it's 'don't make threats you aren't willing to follow through on.' And second, most of the calamities in this *parshah* actually happened at one time or another but the connection between sin and consequences is hardly clear or straight forward.

So I'm troubled by the *tokhehah*. I don't like the idea of a punitive God. And I'm troubled because the vision of this *parshah* does not match the reality of our lives. There just isn't a good explanation for the *tokhehah* – so maybe the only way to understand it is to put ourselves in God's proverbial shoes! Imagine, God sitting on Her throne of judgment, surrounded by angels and looking down at the earth...

And behold it came to pass...God said, "Enough already! I've had it! For five thousand, seven hundred and sixty nine years I've been patiently looking down and trying to hold back My divine temper. I've forgiven them again and again and I've sent prophets and teachers and rabbis and ministers and even a few politicians – and they still don't get it. Enough is enough. Gabriel, get out your shofar. I'm going to call them to account. I'm going to send floods and fire and wind and earth quakes. I'm going to send plagues such as they haven't seen since the time of Pharaoh. I am going to...."

"Hold on God," said Gabriel, "Before you make a rash decision maybe you should think about this. Destroying them won't be so easy and it won't change anything."

"What are you talking about, Gabe? What we need is a good flood – just like we had in the time of Noah!"

Said Gabriel: "Uh God don't you remember? You did a flood a few years ago. And you promised there that there would be no total destruction by flood. Any way the last time you caused a flood, they gave it a name and sent supplies from all over to take care of the victims. Now they're rebuilding their cities. Not only that, but they have put up dike stronger and higher then the last ones."

Then God said: "Well how about an earthquake? That's what we need! A good earthquake will shake things up!"

"We've done that too" said Gabriel, "they will just dismiss it as seismic activity. And once you have destroyed the cities they will call it an opportunity for urban renewal. By the way, in some places their buildings are now earthquake proof."

God was a little less certain: "What do you think about a big fire? Fires always scare the heck out of them!"

"No, I don't think that will work either. Their fire fighters are pretty darn good. And they would probably blame the fire on arson before they blame You."

God mulled this over. Teaching Her world a lesson wasn't so simple. In the old days a good disaster could whip people into shape. When God sent Jonah to Ninveh, all the prophet had to do was say: 'In thirty days God will destroy your city,' and they all repented! But now everything could be explained through science or nature, and besides they just didn't see God even if She was in front of their noses.

"You know, Gabriel, in the old days I could send my sword to cut them down. Maybe that's what we need now; you know, that tenth plague in Egypt was a real doozie!!"

Gabriel was feeling sorry for God. “Sorry, but they’re already doing quite a job on their own first born. They send them to war and they blow their children up through acts of terror. Their weapons are far more effective than Your sword. Why, they have bombs that could knock out an entire city in minutes.”

By now, God was pretty depressed. How could She teach Her children a lesson? In the old days all you had to do was threaten and they would listen. But now – they could explain and rationalize almost anything. Threats no longer worked. God sighed in resignation – She had created a monster!

From the far corner of the room came a chuckle...it was Satan who, by the way, in the Jewish tradition is not some demonic being but God’s own prosecuting attorney.

“What are you laughing at Satan,” asked God, “Do you think it’s funny that I don’t know what to do about my own kids?”

“No, it’s not,” said Satan apologetically, “they’ve doing a better job than I ever could in creating Hell on earth. But I know the solution to your problem!”

“Do tell,” said God, curious to hear what Her annoying prosecuting attorney had to say, “And what would you do, if you were Me?”

“It’s simple,” said Satan, “Do nothing. Leave them to their own devices. Let them make their lives really miserable. Humankind as a whole is no different than its own children. When children reach a certain age, they stop listening to their parents. They think their parents are stupid. They think they have all the answers. And the only way for them to learn is to make their own stupid mistakes – to screw things up for themselves. Eventually they’ll figure it all out – hopefully before it’s too late. They’ll inflict worse punishments on themselves than You could ever imagine.”

God – let’s face it - Your children have outgrown you. It’s not that they don’t need you – it’s just that you can’t tell them anymore – they have to figure this out on their own.”

God was just a little sad because She knew Satan was right. The Bible had been given to human beings when they were young. They had grown up – unfortunately not enough to make good decisions for themselves and now God would have to wait for them gain enough wisdom to make wise decisions. And with that, God shed a tear because she hated to see Her children suffer.

Gabriel, who had been taking all this in, turned to God and gently said, “God, you’re looking pretty low. I already have my great shofar out. Is there anything you’d like me to play?”

And God said, “Yea, why don’t you play some blues!”

And so it was....

Shabbat Shalom