

Behar-Behukotai 5781 **A Torah of Consequences**

Today's parashah is one of the most challenging parts of the Torah. Rabbis say that a lot, but trust me, this one really is.

This morning our reading contained what's known as the 'tochecha' - a list of blessings that are to come if the people obey the Holy One, and a list of curses if the people don't.

Count them up and we find there are way more curses than blessings.

This is a problem on so many levels.

First of all, the content itself is truly nasty. In contrast to the peace and tranquility imagined in the landscape of blessing, the landscape of curses is beset with pain and exile. That's why the tradition has arisen that we don't even read them fully out loud.

And under the lists is a really disturbing theology. Do we really believe in that kind of God? How can it be fair that there are more curses than blessings? What about *teshuvah*?

What's a rabbi to do with that?

Well, fortunately, our tradition is very big on selective reading. It's completely within the rules of the game to take one word and run with it. So let's run with the first word of each list - the Hebrew word *im*. It means, IF.... In other words, it points us to the concept of consequences.

Every time we get to page 153 of the Siddur I notice the quotation by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner in the left-hand margin. It's linked thematically to the Yotzer prayer, the first blessing before the Shema, when we lift up our eyes to the universe and metaphorically visit with the angelic sphere that circles it.

This is what Rabbi Kushner has to say:

The Hebrew word for angel is malakh which also means “messenger,” one who is sent...Unsuspecting and unaware. Consumed by their own plans and itineraries. Busy at work on their own schemes...people chosen to be messengers of the Most High rarely even know that they are God’s messengers...I do not know how many times in one’s life one is also a messenger. But for everyone it is at least once.¹

Rambam (Maimonides) teaches:

It is, therefore, necessary for us to behold ourselves throughout the whole year in a light of being evenly balanced between innocence and guilt, and look upon the entire world as if evenly balanced between innocence and guilt; thus, if one of us commits one sin, that person will overbalance themselves and the whole world to the side of guilt, and be a cause of its destruction; but if one of us performs one obligation, behold, that person will overbalance themselves and the whole world to the side of virtue, and bring about their own and the world’s deliverance and escape, even as it is said: “But the righteous is an everlasting foundation” (Prov. 10. 25), it is that person, whose righteousness overbalanced the whole world to virtue and saved it.²

Both of these teachers are reminding us that we don’t ever really know whose lives we touch. We have a power that we don’t even realize we possess.

Let me give you just one small example from our own community. This week I received an email from a friend of Daniela Piperno’s in New York. Daniela left our community for New York two or three years ago. The email explained that the sender had been watching the Facebook recordings of our Kabbalat Shabbat services and asked if they could have the Zoom link to join us “in the room” when they could. Who would have imagined that our services would travel so far and touch the life of someone none of us have (yet) met?

¹ Siddur *Lev Shalem* page 153.

² Maimonides, *Hilchot Teshuvah* 3:4

And sometimes the consequences of a very simple action can truly turn lives upside down. The leadership consultant Drew Dudley has a TED talk in which he describes how one day, out of the blue, he received a wedding invitation - to celebrate with two people he thought he didn't know. He contacted the couple. It turned out that years before, when he was working for a charity on the campus of a university, the young woman had been standing in the registration line ready to quit. Drew Dudley was handing out lollipops for the charity - he gave one to the young woman and told her to give it to the young man standing next to her. There was something about that interaction that changed her mind. She decided that maybe she would stay. And the young man - yes, his is the other name on the wedding invitation. All because of a random moment that Drew Dudley himself didn't even remember. All because of a lollipop.³

Sometimes it's whole groups of lives that are changed. For example: a Japanese inventor created a scanner that could tell the difference between croissants and bear claws at the checkout and price them up automatically. Until a doctor in Kyoto heard of this and realized that if the software could distinguish between a croissant and a bear claw, it could also distinguish between cells that have cancer and cells that don't....⁴

All the way through this Torah cycle we have noticed in different ways that Vayikra is the book of patterns - that the content of Vayikra is often symbolically pointing us to a bigger idea. Even though those blessings and curses seem so stark and obvious, is there a bigger idea in today's parashah too?

³ <https://www.wbur.org/npr/261094881/have-you-changed-someones-life-without-realizing-it>

⁴ <https://www.newyorker.com/tech/annals-of-technology/the-pastry-ai-that-learned-to-fight-cancer>

Perhaps. We noticed at the start that the curses far outweigh the blessings. But that's only if we count them by number. If we factor in the way that our good actions can radiate far beyond the scope of what we can see, or even imagine or remember, then we might be able to imagine a world in which blessings outweigh curses, in the end. that As Maimonides taught, it only takes one single act to tip the balance. As Rabbi Kushner taught, once in our lives - and perhaps more than once - we are going to be someone's good angel.

And angels defy numbers.

Shabbat shalom.