

Parshat Ki Tavo: Controlling the Weather

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“You can’t control the weather” is a milquetoast idiom in English, as inoffensive small talk of current temperature conditions. But a repeated motif in Ki Tavo especially, and Jewish liturgy generally, is the startling claim that human beings do, in fact, control the weather. Parshat Ki Tavo contains a bewildering, lengthy unit of text describing the calamities that will befall Bnei Yisrael should they fail to observe God’s commandments. It is in some ways parallel to the tokhecha section of Parshat Bechukotai, though it is longer and arguably darker. Unlike the earlier tokhecha, the rebuke section of Ki Tavo does not conclude on a note of hope or uplift. (Ramban reasons that the hint of redemption that actually concludes this dark section of the Torah does eventually come—in Nitzavim, the next parsha. But even so, the glimmer of redemption is delayed.)

The portentous visions elaborated in this second tokhecha are of several types, with the weather-related calamities coming in the earlier section:

Hashem will strike you...with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew; they shall hound you until you perish. The skies above your head shall be copper and the earth under you iron. Hashem will make the rain of your land dust, and sand shall drop on you from the sky, until you are wiped out (Devarim 28:22-24).

These haunting words are invoked in the daily Shema, the second paragraph of which says:

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving Hashem your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil—I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For Hashem’s anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that Hashem is assigning to you (Devarim 11:13-21).

To modern ears schooled in science, these verses can seem primitive: misbehave and an angry God will punish you with drought. To postmodern ears, Moshe’s claims sound fresh again: indeed it is our affluence-driven moral failings that brings about climate change and impending climate disaster. I would like to suggest that it is neither of these things: yes, there are powerful natural forces that pervade Hashem’s universe, and yes, the Lorax is correct that our lust for thneeds will do us in, and yet these are not the only lessons we are meant to draw from this section of the Torah.

Rather, the tokhecha of Ki Tavo is a statement about navigating those frustrating, even tragic constraints of Hashem’s world that we struggle to understand. It orients us away from the Divine understanding for which we long—*why do bad things happen to good people?*— and nudges us towards what we should do *now*, instead.

In several notable places in rabbinic literature, Chazal struggle with theodicy with that very question of why suffering befalls the undeserving. One of the passages to do so is found in the Yerushalmi. It begins with the assumption that the coming year's rainfall, tied as it is to the morality of the people, is calculated by Hashem on Rosh Hashana. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai poses the troubling question: what if Klal Yisrael does teshuva on Rosh Hashana itself, only to turn around and commit sins immediately thereafter?

Rebbi Simeon ben Yoḥai stated: If Israel were acceptable on New Year's Day and ample rain was decided for them, but in the end they sinned. To reduce it [the prescribed rain] is impossible [since the decision had been rendered.] What does the Holy Blessed One do? He disperses it into oceans, deserts, and rivers, so that the earth has no benefit from it. What is the reason? "To let rain on manless earth, desert with no human in it" (Iyov 38:26) (Yerushalmi Rosh Hashana 1:3 (57b)).

The profundity of the solution here is worth our pause. There are unalterable facts in the Divine calculus, at least to the rabbinic mind: the Jewish people really were worthy of beneficent rains, until they were not, but the decree really was made, and the absolute amounts of rain are not subject to change. This is a true dilemma. So the abundant quantity of the rain must hold, but that does not mean that Hashem does not course-correct, so to speak. Rather, the rains are disbursed differently from their initial plan, in such a way that they do not benefit humanity. The facts are the same, but the outcome is different. The process by which the world unfolds responds to our choices.

But perhaps this is a bit of sophistry, a neat solution for a thorny problem? After all, what about the reverse situation, in which the Jewish people do teshuva—but too late? There is seemingly no way to produce *more* rain out of too little. For this, too, the Yerushalmi has a pointed solution: Hashem redistributes the meager rain so that it can exercise maximum benefit on the earth.

Here again, Hashem reacts with due compassion for the people's sincere repentance and good behavior, using natural techniques to make little rainfall into ample water, not unlike the modern state of Israel does through technologies like desalination, drip irrigation, and hydroponics.

But is this not another clever bit of sophistry? After all, the rabbis themselves knew that such neat and happy outcomes were not always the case in the world we inhabit, which is why they suggested that some afflictions are *yesurin shel ahava* (afflictions of love), apparent punishments of the righteous in this world who will ultimately be rewarded in *olam ha-ba*. The Yerushalmi insists on the exact causality invoked in *Ki Tavo*. And at the end, finally, a note of acknowledgement, explanation, and comfort: "He [Hashem] lets it [the world] suffer at the beginning and gives it a good future at the end."

Sometimes, things are not so neat. We are dealt flooding swirls of water when we deserve moderation, or unyielding drought as we stare thirstily upwards. In those cases, we suffer first. The good future is still beyond us. And yet we are charged to find ways to adjust to the gales of water or the parched earth.

Moshe's rebuke in *Ki Tavo* (and elsewhere in his final speech to the Jewish people), encapsulated in the *Shema* we utter twice a day, is best understood as process-oriented rather than results-oriented. The point is not that if we observed the mitzvot impeccably, we would never know troubles. Trouble is baked in, perhaps

for reasons we cannot know. But we can, like Hashem in the Yerushalmi, respond in real time to the challenges we are dealt, diverting excess water to the desert or making use of dew to extend too little. Far from being theodically simplistic, Ki Tavo calls us to take responsibility for the situations in which we find ourselves, not because of a simple one-to-one correspondence, but because that is what independent people do in their own land.

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