

## Ki Tavo

### Good Curses, as Part of the Divine System

Internationally acclaimed Nobel Peace Prize winner Eli Weisel had belonged, like the rest of his family, to the Vishnitz sect of Hasidism. After having survived the horrors of the Holocaust, he paid a visit to the Vishnitzer Rebbe. To the Rebbe's inquiry as to his occupation, he replied that he was a writer. The Rebbe continued to inquire innocently: Do you write also texts for Tefilin? Eli Weisel replied that he wrote neither Torah scrolls, nor tefilin, nor mezuzot, but rather he wrote stories. The Rebbe continued: You write stories that happened in reality? Weisel replied that his stories were not reports of events that had taken place, but were rather his own invention. The Rebbe then determined that someone who told tales that had never happened would have to be called a liar.

How so? The difference between a writer and a journalist is that the journalist is committed to reality as it is, as opposed to the writer who invents imaginary tales. While a journalist who is not faithful to reality can be categorized as a liar and a criminal and a deceiver of the people, the writer is expected to invent his stories; no one expects an informative report from him. The greatness of the writer is measured by the extent of his ability to imagine, to invent stories that reflect the essence, the definition of the foundation that lies at the bottom of reality's infrastructure, in the effort to understand reality in a deeper way, an understanding that reflects reality's distilled essence, by eliminating the irrelevant details, with the goal of mirroring reality in principle, a reality that could at any time take on flesh and blood and sinew to become an actual reality. There is no doubt that this task is vital, and that it far surpasses – in quality and in importance – the task of the journalist who deals with mere reporting from a purely informative perspective.

There is however another category of writing: Those stories that belong to the realm of science fiction. These too have their place, and they need not be called lies because no one relates to them seriously; no one imagines they contain a realistic portrayal. They are no more than plans dealing with the fictional realm. They do not presume to reflect any reality whatsoever. Their entire preoccupation is no more than a game dealing with a bubble, much like those branches of mathematics that are true only according to their own rules, despite the fact that many generations have been viewing these mathematical rules as the objective infrastructure to which reality owes its entire foundation of objectivity.

Mathematical researchers today universally acknowledge that these rules do not apply to any reality outside of mathematics, really just like the rules of chess, which are valid only within the bubble of that game. Writers such as Tocqueville and his like belong to science fiction; they can never become rules that can be applied to any reality. Harry Potter stories, in contrast, despite the fact that they have no artistic perspective, belong to human reality; they reflect an authentic reality in principle.

There is no doubt that if one could classify the Torah's literary style, it would belong to the category of imaginary/realistic writing that could become actual, as in the Kotsker Rebbe's sharply stated position: "Whoever believes that it all really happened exactly as written, is a fool, and whoever does not believe that such things really did happen in reality, is a heretic."

Gemara, Tractate Sanhedrin, 71: "The 'rebellious and unruly son,' and the 'distanced city' never happened and were never created, so why were they written in the Torah? For you to study and receive reward." Meaning, the goal in writing of them was to warn, and to educate against these phenomena.

"Rav Yonatan said: 'I have visited the grave of a 'rebellious and unruly son', and I have visited the ruins of a 'distanced city'." It is customary to view Rav Yonatan's position as disputing the opinion of those who say

it never was and never happened. Yet it seems in my humble opinion that Rav Yonatan's words need not necessarily be presented as contradicting the words of the Gemara. Yav Yonatan wishes to warn us against virtual phenomena, as if one could imagine a virtual halacha. His intention is to say that even if they never were and never happened, the danger of their actualization is real and valid, and even if these events have not occurred in the past, the Torah never promises us that they can never happen. One must relate to them with appropriate seriousness: Just as the blessings have a chance of coming true, and they are dependent on our own free choice, so too the curses hold a realistic risk of being actualized, and it is in our own hands, in the power of our own free choice to determine whether it is to be punishment or grace.

The curses in our parasha belong to the perception of a reality that could become actual, and here lies their value. How so? Nearly all of the curses deal with natural disasters of various and peculiar sorts. In the way of the world, when a natural disaster strikes a particular nation – and to our sorrow we have been witness to terrible disasters in the southeastern part of Asia, which have indeed claimed hundreds of thousands of victims and brought ruin upon many countries – the human response is to look for the guilty parties.

Meaning, to consign disasters to the inventory of crimes perpetrated by human hands. At other times, man will not search for guilty parties when dealing with natural disasters, but instead will view them as random chance, bad luck, misfortune and nothing more. This response too is inappropriate, because of its abnormality. By attributing a disaster to bad luck, random chance removes the disaster from the list of programmed systems whose hidden rules one must learn, in order to know how to properly react to them. If it is mere random chance, man is not required to relate to the incident: The wisest thing would be to ignore it; he is not to view himself as being responsible for it.

In a previous article, we discussed the natural disasters included in the framework of human responsibility, by virtue of man's being a partner to the Master of the universe, a partner who takes part in the management of the universe, whether for punishment or for grace. It is in his hands to ruin and it is in his hands to repair. Nature is dependent on human behavior, as illustrated by the Flood, a natural disaster of awful proportions, caused by human beings.

Murmuring within man is the tendency to retreat from the evil hidden within him. He tends to view it as a foreign implant. Evidence for this is his feeling of outrage and insult when accused of some guilt. Meaning that man, who was created in God's image, cannot live with the idea that he is a bad person.

My grandson, not yet five years old, has already heard of the *yetser hara*, the "evil urge". Arriving home, he interrogates his mother on this topic: How does the *yetser hara* look, what clothing does he wear? Innocently, he admits that he too has a *yetser hara*. For example, when he wakes up, he knows that he must not make noise, so as not to wake his mother, who is still in a deep sleep. But the *yetser hara* comes to him, wakes him up, and makes noise to wake up his mother. "You have to understand, *Ima*. I'm not the one who wakes you up. It's the *yetser hara*. He comes to me and wants to play with me."

From adults as well, though they may identify with the God-fearing camp with all their hearts, it is possible to hear similar explanations and excuses. What can we do? We mean to do good, but the "leaven in the dough", the *yetser hara*, hinders us!

The tendency to view the *yetser hara* as a foreign implant, invading and settling our borders, toward whom we feel no admiration whatsoever, is an error that is infantile. It makes its appearance as a lame excuse, and serves as a temporary and ineffectual tranquilizer.

Hazal describe the *yetser hara* as a fly sitting between the openings of the heart, filling the role of temptation incarnate. By describing it as settling in the most delicate and sensitive location within ourselves, Hazal

mean to say and to warn us that the *yetser hara* is not a foreign implant. Their intention is to point toward two reversible tendencies that characterize the human personality, which balance man's ability to make use of his free choice.

These two tendencies characterize every single nook and cranny of the human personality, and are to be viewed as a natural part of the personality rather than a foreign implant that we must retreat from, so as not to complicate our good and proper character.

One of the fundamental characteristics of free choice is the need to confront it and to control it. Succumbing to the evil tendency does not help free choice in any way.

The tendency to retreat from evil originates in the tendency to throw every natural disaster into the bag of random chance, whenever the search for guilty parties becomes difficult or unfeasible.

Along comes the Torah and details a long list of ills that belong for the most part to natural disaster, thereby preventing man from throwing natural disasters off of himself into the basket of random chance, denying him the option of shedding responsibility or guilt feelings, when faced with the phenomenon of a natural disaster.

Instead the Torah stands firm in attaching these phenomena to the very center of the Godly plan. By granting these phenomena citizenship under conditions that are within human control, the Torah conveys a hidden message of optimism: It is in your hands, as partner to the Holy One in the management of the universe, to repair the evil that appears as punishment in the form of natural disasters. It is in your hands to repair them and to control them, to prevent them: All that you must do is repair your own ways. Therefore, explanations of random chance are entirely unjustified. If disease or any other natural disaster comes upon you, you need search no further than yourself, for guilty parties.

Sometimes you are not the direct cause of what is happening to you, because you do not belong to yourself alone. "All of Yisrael are guarantors for one another" and the behavior of others depends on you as well. This is good news for the Jews: Natural disasters are given to their control, when they join the list of the Godly plan. The Torah would not leave them in the hands of random chance.