

BENEFIT FINDING



PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT NITZAVIM
RABBI DR. MORDECHAI SCHIFFMAN

After predicting that Bnei Yisrael will turn away from G-d, and consequently be punished and exiled, Moshe Rabbeinu pronounces that they will eventually hit such a low point that they will mend their ways. After hitting rock bottom, Bnei Yisrael will repent and be returned to the land. Yet, in introducing this turn of events, Moshe adds a word that seems to run counter to his message. “When all these things befall you, the blessing and the curse that I have set before you, and you take them to heart... and you will return to the Lord your G-d...” (Devarim 30:1-2). The sense one gets from the broader context is that the catalyst for the repentance is the curse, not the blessing. So why does Moshe sneak in the word blessing, when it seems out of place?

Ktav Sofer, amidst a broader historical analysis of the fate of the Jewish people, suggests that there is a deep psychological insight alluded to in this pasuk. The impact of the curse is amplified by the fact that Bnei Yisrael previously experienced blessing. Pain and suffering are intensified when they are preceded by joy and comfort. Hence, the focus of the pasuk is the curse, but to magnify the blow of the curse, the previous blessing is referenced. In a more hopeful explanation, Ohr HaChaim suggests that the pasuk is presenting alternative options to spark repentance. The ideal method is to realize during the times of blessing that we can improve our ways. If we don’t, then the alternative, more aversive option, is to repent after experiencing the curses.

Ohr HaChaim presents another answer, with deep theological implications. The Mishna (Berachot 9:5) states that a person should make a blessing on the bad, just as he does on the good. Rava explains (Berachot 60b) that even though the content of the blessing for positive occurrences is different than for negative ones, the general mindset while making both types of blessings should be the same, namely, they should be said with contentment. Ohr HaChaim suggests that when Moshe lumps the blessings and the curses together in the pasuk, he is teaching us that we should view the curses with the same contentment as the blessings. Malbim adds that the curse is a “gift” just like the blessing, as it functions to bring Bnei Yisrael to repent and create the optimal spiritual life in the Land of Israel.

The practical application of this concept can be complicated. If someone is experiencing intense pain, whether physical or emotional, it is rarely appropriate or helpful for another person to bluntly suggest that the person who is suffering look at the situation as a blessing. Yet, if a person can work on seeing his or her anguish in a more positive light, whether through his or her own introspection or with the help and support of a close friend or therapist, there can be tremendous spiritual and psychological benefits. In the psychological literature, the concept of experiencing positive effects after traumatic events is often referred to as posttraumatic growth or as benefit finding. The ability to find benefits within suffering has shown to have positive impacts for people who have survived traumatic events such as cancer, violence, sexual assault, natural disasters, and chronic pain, amongst others.

Internalizing this message can be incredibly difficult and sometimes just as painful and arduous as the actual suffering. Yet, there are important spiritual and psychological benefits to be had if we can see the blessing within a curse. Ideally, we hope to not have to be confronted with such challenges. May we be blessed with a year of positivity, that our greatest test should be to see the blessing within a blessing.

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