

Verse 1:1

נִיְהִי בִימֵי אֶחָשׁוּרוּשׁ הוּא אֶחָשׁוּרוּשׁ הַמֶּלֶךְ מֵהַדוּ וְעַד כּוּשׁ שְׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה:

And it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus – this is the Ahasuerus who ruled from Hodu to Cush,¹ one hundred and twenty-seven provinces.

Unstable Ruler

Abba Uryan of Zidon said in the name of Rabban Gamliel (*Esther Rabbah Pesikta* 9):²

When the beloved children's deeds made their Father in Heaven angry, He set over them a fickle king to impose retribution upon them. Who was this? This was Ahasuerus.

What does the Midrash mean by the names it pins on the Jews and Ahasuerus? Why are the Jews, in their wayward state, called "beloved children"? Why is Ahasuerus called a "fickle king"?³

The key lies in another Midrash, which reads as follows (*Vayikra Rabbah* 35:1 on Leviticus 26:3):

It is written (Psalms 119:59): "I pondered my ways, and made my feet turn back to Your testimonies." Said David: "Master of the Universe! ... I pondered the blessings and the curses [in Leviticus Ch. 26]. The blessings begin with an *alef* [in the word אַם] and end with the letter *tav* [קוֹמֵמִיּוֹת]. But the curses begin with the letter *vav* [וְאִם] and end with the letter *hei* [מִשָּׁה]. Furthermore, the *vav* and the *hei* appear in reverse [the *vav* is at the beginning and the *hei* at the end, whereas in the alphabet *hei* precedes *vav*].

This Midrash is rather enigmatic. But we know that the words of our Sages are very deep, and must be probed beyond their surface meaning. They are, as King Solomon put it (Proverbs 25:11), "golden apples in silver settings."⁴ Just as the precious gold is concealed by the silver settings, so too the profound ideas of our Sages are often concealed within the sayings in which they are couched. In the Midrash just quoted, the Sages did not explicitly reveal what the Torah is hinting at by inverting the order of the first and last letters in the passage of the curses. Hence we must make an effort to grasp the meaning.

It appears that the inverse order is meant to indicate the nature of these particular curses. They are not definitive curses of the type God pronounces upon us in fierce anger, such as the curse (Deuteronomy 11:17), "And He shall shut up the Heavens and there will be no rain." Rather, they are blessings that have been inverted into curses. It is the same with the

¹ Hodu and Cush are commonly identified with India and Ethiopia, respectively.

² The *Anaf Yosef* on this Midrash cites the Maggid's commentary here.

³ Cf. *Megillah* 15b, which also describes Ahasuerus as fickle.

⁴ Cf. *Moreh Nevuchim* of the Rambam, Introduction (*Pesichah*), s.v. אִמֵּר הַחֶכֶם תְּפֹחֵי זָהָב בְּמִשְׁכִּיּוֹת כֶּסֶף (golden apples in silver settings). I thank my good friend R' Ephraim Patachnik for pointing out this reference.

passage of curses in Deuteronomy Ch. 28.⁵ There we find a series of curses such as the following:

- a. You shall take out to the field a great quantity of seed, but you shall gather in little, for the locusts shall destroy it (Deuteronomy 28:38).
- b. You shall beget sons and daughters, but they shall not be yours, for they shall go into captivity (Deuteronomy 28:41).
- c. The foreigners among you shall rise above you higher and higher, while you descend lower and lower (Deuteronomy 28:44).

These curses differ in a basic way from the curse of no rain. In the curse of no rain, the source of blessing is removed altogether. By contrast, in the foregoing three curses, the source of the original blessing remains, and is simply turned into a source of anguish.⁶ In other words, they are blessings that have been inverted into curses.⁷ This is a strong indication that God is not definitively pronouncing curses upon us here. Rather, He is lovingly waiting for us to repent, so that He may turn the curses back into the blessings that they were before.

An allegory will bring out the point. A very rich man had an only son, whom he always dressed in splendid clothes. Once this man ordered for his son a particularly expensive embroidered silk suit. Beneath the silk exterior, a linen lining was sewn in for support. Some time later the father found, to his displeasure, that the son treated this expensive suit carelessly and made no effort to keep it from getting dirty. The father therefore turned the suit inside out and put it on his son that way. The boy thus became a laughing-stock to all who saw him.

Someone approached the father and rebuked him: "You are quite able to buy your son fine clothes, aren't you? Why then do you dress him in a linen peasant outfit?" This person thought that the suit really was just a simple linen suit, and that the father was merely being cheap. The father replied: "By your life, my dear man, this is the very same silk suit that my son was wearing before. I just turned it inside out temporarily so that he would learn not to mistreat it. I hope he will indeed learn the lesson, and take the initiative to turn it right side out again."

The parallel is as follows. On many occasions when we stray, God does not wish to pour out His wrath upon us, but simply to hint to us to straighten out our crooked ways. In these situations, He does not completely nullify the blessings He planned to give us and

⁵ The two passages of curses referred to in the text—Leviticus Ch. 26 and Deuteronomy Ch. 28—are generally known as the passages of *תוכחה* (rebuke).

⁶ These three sentences have been added in an attempt to clarify the difference between the curse of no rain and the curses in Deuteronomy Ch. 28 that the Maggid cites.

⁷ That is, these curses represent inverted versions of the blessings in the passage that just precedes them. Compare the curses cited in the text with the blessings in Deuteronomy 28:1-14. Several of the verses there describe blessings of agricultural prosperity and of fertility in bearing children. In addition, the blessing in Deuteronomy 28:13 represents the flip side of the curse in Deuteronomy 28:44. Similarly, the curses in Leviticus 26:14-46 are inverted versions of the blessings in Leviticus 26:3-13. On the topic of blessings turned into curses, viewed from a different angle, see the Maggid's commentary on Lamentations 1:7 (the piece entitled *Reverse Image* in my translation).

replace them with outright curses. Instead, He just turns the blessings inside out and converts them into curses. When we repent, He converts these curses back into blessings.

This idea is reflected in the following Gemara (*Gittin 7a*), which refers to the punishment meted out to the Jewish People for their idolatrous practices at the end of the First Temple period:

"Thus said the Lord God: 'I shall remove the miter and take off the crown. This [curse], is it not [just like] this [blessing that you had] (זאת לא זאת), with the lowly raised up and the lofty brought low?' (Ezekiel 21:31)⁸ ... When the Holy One Blessed Be He told the People of Israel, "I shall remove the miter and take off the crown," the ministering angels asked Him: "Master of the Universe! Is *this* the way to treat the People of Israel, who said at Sinai 'we shall do' before 'we shall listen'?"⁹ He said to them: "Is *this not* the way to treat the People of Israel, now that they have brought low the lofty and raised up the lowly, and placed an idol in the Temple sanctuary?"

The Jewish People were in a state of "זאת לא זאת" – "this and not this." They were in essence as they were before – fundamentally good – but in a way were also not as they were before, because they had deviated from the proper path. Hence God kept the blessing intact as before, but turned it inside out, into a curse, due to the Jewish People's improper deeds. Thus, in parallel with the Jewish People's "זאת לא זאת" state, God acted toward them in a "זאת לא זאת" fashion. That is what God was telling the angels. His treatment of the Jewish People in their wayward state was simply the mirror image of how He treated them in their glory days: He brought low the lofty and raised up the lowly. In essence God did not change His ways at all. If the Jewish People would repent, He would immediately turn the curse back into blessing. The approach of turning blessings into curses has the advantage that the curses can be turned back into blessings with a simple switch when the Jews repent.

This is the point of the Midrash about the blessings and curses.¹⁰ When we stray from the proper path and sin against God, the blessings are converted into curses. But God waits for us to repent, so that He may turn the curses back into blessings. In this vein it is written (Deuteronomy 30:1-2): "And it will come to pass, when all these things come upon you – the *blessing and the curse* that I have set before you – that you shall take the matter to heart, amidst all the nations among whom the Lord your God has cast you. And you shall return to the Lord your God and hearken to His voice . . ." When you see the blessing turned into a curse, you will recognize that the blessing and the curse are two sides of the same coin. You then will take the matter to heart, and realize that the side that faces you depends on your efforts toward repentance. And then you will return to God.

Thus there are two types of curses: definitive curses with no element of blessing, such as the deprivation of rain mentioned in Deuteronomy 11:17, and curses which are inverted versions of blessings. The type of curse pronounced upon us depends on the nature of our

⁸ This is a homiletical rendering of the verse, following the Maggid's commentary.

⁹ Exodus 24:7.

¹⁰ Of Leviticus Ch. 26.

sinning and the number of sinners among us. If we behave as total sinners, with no element of good, then the Holy One Blessed Be He becomes disgusted with us and imposes upon us a definitive punishment. But if we are basically righteous, and have just partially strayed from the proper path because of the abundance of blessing bestowed upon us, God responds in a different manner. He simply takes away the blessings and converts them into curses, so that our hearts will be aroused to repent our errant deeds. Once we repent, the curses are converted back into blessings.

This is what happened in the days of Ahasuerus. The Midrash refers to the Jewish People as "beloved children," because God indeed still loved them. He knew that they would repent. Hence He set over them a fickle king, who did not follow through consistently on his initial intentions. Ahasuerus was indeed an inconsistent ruler. As the Midrash puts it:¹¹ "Once he killed his wife for his friend's sake, and another time he killed his friend for his wife's sake." Thus, when the Jewish People repented, he could be easily dissuaded from harming them.

But if the Jewish People of a given generation are all totally rebellious and debased, then, as Isaiah put it (Isaiah 19:4), "a brazen king shall rule over them." A bold nation like Assyria will be chosen to serve as God's rod of chastisement (cf. Isaiah 10:5). God will wreak devastation upon them, showing no mercy. In this vein, Jeremiah declared (Lamentations 3:1-2): "I am the man who has seen the affliction meted out by His rod of wrath. He has led me through darkness, and made me walk where there is no light." Jeremiah saw the Jewish People being handed over to a crushing enemy. In addition, he saw that, "even though I cry out and plead to the Lord, He has shut out my prayer" (Lamentations 3:8). This proved clearly that there was no hint of love in the punishment: it was all darkness, with no light.

Returning to the Midrash about Ahasuerus, the Midrash concludes by saying that when the Jewish People saw that Ahasuerus had been set over them to oppress them, they cried "Woe."¹² They did not see the situation the way the All-Present One saw it. They believed that the rise of Ahasuerus was a calamity. But in truth it was just the opposite. The real calamity was the Jewish People's sinfulness. God specifically picked Ahasuerus to rule over them, because Ahasuerus was a fickle, wavering person, who could be readily appeased when the Jewish People repented. As our Sages state, Ahasuerus was not naturally destined to be a ruler.¹³ Rather, God put Ahasuerus in power to deal with us appropriately – to oppress us while we sinned, and to show us favor when we repented.

¹¹ This statement appears earlier in *Esther Rabbah Pesikta* 9.

¹² The Midrash states further on (*Esther Rabbah Pesikta* 11) that the phrase **ויהי בימי** is a portent of woe, as in the Gemara cited in the next piece.

¹³ *Esther Rabbah* 1:4, quoted by *Rashi* on our verse.