

WHEN THE CURSES COME

By Rabbi David Algaze

“But it will be that if you do not hearken to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, to observe, to perform all His commandments...then all these curses will come upon you and overtake you.” (Devarim 28:15)

The terrifying prophecy of horrors that would happen to the Jewish people if they spurn the Torah and God is one of the most difficult passages to read in the Torah. It is called the *tochacha*, admonition, but unfortunately it has served as a tragic catalogue of the many penuries and tribulations our people have experienced in its long history. Since the curses are written in the singular person, some commentators suggest that these curses apply only to individuals and not to the nation as a whole. However, the Maharsha, in his *novellae* on Baba Batra 88, observes that because the curses were uttered at the time of their entry to the Land of Israel, all Jews are interconnected, as guarantors to one another. Therefore, whatever is meant for an individual, it would be experienced by the entire people.

Thus, the events described in this long and frightening list, have become a description of historical moments that would befall upon Israel. Abarbanel writes, “It is important to notice that the curses in this parasha are not mere threats or hyperbole, but are rather prophecies of events to come and all of them were fulfilled in the generations of sinners.” For instance, the verse, “Hashem will return you to Egypt in ships” (v. 68) which commentators struggled to find when it happened, was resolved by Rabbi David Tzvi Hoffman by reference to the time of the Second Temple when Titus sent 17,000 Jewish rebels to Egypt as slaves. Nachmanides interprets the verse, “Hashem will carry against you a nation from afar...a nation whose language you will not understand” (v. 50) as referring to Rome whose language Latin, unlike Aramaic, was not known in Israel. And so with many of the other scary descriptions found in this passage.

Abarbanel writing in Spain at the time of the Inquisition, concludes that the Destruction continues until our day. The Second Temple was not really a time of Redemption because we were subject to other kingdoms and world powers. Herod was wholly dependent on the Roman government and could not act freely. This resembles the dependence of Israel today on the US government and its inability to act entirely on its own. This is not real freedom but rather a situation of “freedom within subjection” where our actions are limited by others. It is noteworthy that the verse “I will make their sanctuaries desolate” (Vayikra 26:31) is interpreted by the Ralbag (Gersonides, Provence, 1288-1344) to refer to the destruction of synagogues throughout the countries of our dispersion. How true it is, how many times we have had to abandon the synagogues so painstakingly and livingly

built by our forefathers as we ran away from our persecutors! How much more tragic it was the fulfillment of this prophecy when the beautiful synagogues built by loving and hopeful hands in Gush Katif were abandoned to the enemy only to be burnt and desecrated by our adversaries!

These tragedies have happened to us only because we did not keep our side of the Covenant with Hashem. One may ask, “did we deserve such punishments?” Were the thousands of years of our long and horrifying Exile justified? How can we explain the innumerable tortures and losses we have endured? The Spanish Inquisition, the destruction of communities in England, France, Germany, the pogroms, the pillaging, the Holocaust and now the greater opprobrium of having a feeble foothold in our own Land—how can we explain all this? Why did Hashem send all this to His beloved and chosen Nation?

The answer lies in our own parasha. The main comforting element in this gruesome catalogue of curses is the revelation of the cause of all of these tragedies to come. The Torah regards the curses as a necessary corollary to our sins. Therefore, just as our actions bring about the tragedy, so can our repentance (*Teshuvah*) bring about their disappearance. As we say in our prayers, “It is due to our sins that we have become exiled from our Land.” The Torah, as a good physician, diagnoses the cause of our illness and thus enables us to find the proper remedy and medication to our ailments. When a doctor warns us that if we eat certain foods we could have a terrible reaction, he is not “cursing” us. He is merely warning us of the consequences of our actions in order that we should not do them. He hopes that we will not act foolishly, that we will not contract these diseases, but his duty is to describe the pain we will suffer if we fail to listen to his advice.

The consolation is that we can avoid these tragedies; we can access all the blessings that He has in store for us. The secret is simply to observe “the words of this Torah that are written in this Book, to fear this honored and awesome Name: Hashem your G-d.” (v. 58)

Another note of comfort is that even as He punishes us severely He does not forsake us. Inside the curses lie many consolations. In the verse, “And among those nations you will not be tranquil, there will be no rest for the sole of your foot” (v. 65), R. Yitzhac Arama (Spain 1420-1494) sees a beautiful message: “Even as you prosper among the nations, you will not be able to find rest among them, for they will eventually scorn you and insult you.” It is with this dreadful warning that G-d is in fact reassuring us that we will never assimilate entirely, that our nation will exist forever and that one day we will return to our Land with gladness and purity of heart. “Despite all this...I will not be revolted by them nor will I reject them...for I am Hashem their G-d.” (Vayikra 26:44)