

**PARSHAT KI TAVO**  
**SEPTEMBER 9, 2017**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

Our Torah reading this morning is all about blessings and curses. The central message is based upon free will. The people of Israel may do good or evil. If they remain faithful to G-d's covenant, they will be blessed in their land. If they sin, they will suffer the consequences of that sin. Should they choose to repent then G-d will restore their relationship. This cause and effect concept is very much part of Biblical theology. Reward and punishment in this world are based upon our deeds and actions. The concept is enunciated in our Torah portion of this morning, in the second paragraph of the Shema, and in many other Biblical texts. The basis is free will. Israel makes the choice as to their conduct and the repercussions which ensue.

On the other hand, in other sections of the Bible, especially in the book of Deuteronomy, the language is more fatalistic. In Moses' final poem to the Children of Israel towards the end of the book, G-d informs Israel that they will sin, they will fail, and they will suffer. When Israel suffers the consequences of that unfaithfulness, they will not be able to blame G-d for abandoning them. Yet, G-d will redeem Israel to protect G-d's reputation even if Israel chooses not to repent.

This dichotomy is present in many prophetic sources. Most prophets see the free choice-repentance model for redemption. Others, like Ezekiel, see G-d's restoration of Israel as not being conditional on Israel's repentance, but on G-d's own decision-making process.

There are, thus, two views of redemption known to us in Biblical and rabbinic literature. One, is utopian – Israel will merit the advent of the Messiah when Israel repents, when it celebrates two Shabbatot in a row, when it follows G-d's laws. The other is apocalyptic, that is, the end is already set. G-d will bring redemption at G-d's own time. The best example in Biblical literature is the book of Daniel. But there have been others throughout history who have predicted an end of time which G-d would bring about, not Israel. Fortunately, or unfortunately, they have all erred.

Based on the last verse of our Haftorah this morning, the Talmud in Sanhedrin states: "Rabbi Alexandri said: Rabbi Joshua ben Levi pointed out a contradiction. It is written, 'in its time' (*be'itah*) [the Messiah will come], and it also written 'I the Lord will hasten it' (*ahishenah*). If they are worthy, I will hasten it; if not, [the Messiah will come] at the due time." In other words, in the last two words of our Haftorah both of the concepts of the Messiah's arrival are present. Israel will either merit the redemption or G-d will hasten it. The Talmud suggests that the outcome will depend on the merit of Israel.

This is a very important discussion for our day and age. Only a short while ago in our services we offered a prayer for the welfare of the State of Israel and called it *Reshit Zemichat Geulateinu*

- The beginning of the flowering of our redemption. What does the State of Israel represent for us? Does it represent the beginning of the flowering, only the very introduction of our redemption? Has the process begun? Are we on the road to the final redemption? Does it represent any part of the redemption at all? How shall we confront the establishment of the State in our lifetime? This issue has been discussed by religious thinkers, Israeli politicians, and philosophers since the creation of the state.

Rabbi Haim David Halevi, a former Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv and a great Sephardic Torah scholar, wrote that the creation of the State of Israel was indeed the beginning of our redemption. While it seems that it came about naturally through the process of history (*be'itah*) and human endeavor, we are living in a time of great miracles. In his book *Aseh Lecha Rav* he suggests that he cannot understand why those who are religious cannot see this in their daily lives. He is upset that those on the very Right, what is today known as the Ultra-Orthodox, are unwilling to accept the miraculous nature of the birth of the State of Israel and the road to redemption on which he now sees us proceeding. Like Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Palestine, he suggests that the real work in establishing the State was done by secular Jews, with the religious Jews only coming along later. G-d's plan for redemption was, therefore, achieved as the secularists became G-d's agents of redemption.

There are many today who are not comfortable with this religious nomenclature, who simply see the State of Israel established by a UN resolution, saved by the bravery of the IDF in the War of Independence and in subsequent wars. There is no miracle present, there is no road to redemption on which we find ourselves, and Israel today is a nation like all others in the world, beset by complex problems and containing wonderful human initiatives.

If one would sit in the Knesset and ask the question whether the birth of the State of Israel is a miracle and we are on the road to redemption, there would be a variety of opinions. The Ultra-Orthodox would declare that we must wait for the Messiah before establishing the State; the religious Zionists would claim that indeed we are on that road to redemption; and the secularists would declare that no redemption is taking place at this time and Israel is a nation state among the many others around the globe. Basing themselves on those philosophies, for example, their views on the territories would be found. What is the proper nomenclature we should use: Judea and Samaria, the West Bank, or the occupied territories? Based on those philosophies, their hopes for the future of the borders and political structures for peace co-existence will be found. The ancient argument in the tractate of Sanhedrin is still present in the Jewish world today.

Upon returning earlier this week from three weeks in Israel on a family visit, I can say that the land is flourishing, life continues at a frenetic pace, and the shops, cafes, and streets were packed. We saw many families on vacation and children preparing for school. At the same time, there is great worry in official circles about Iran and Hezbollah in Syria, Hamas in Gaza, and the constant threat of terrorism that can happen anywhere in the country. On the surface all seems to be well, behind the scenes people have their doubts, their anxieties, even as they express their hopes and their wishes for a peaceful existence for their children and grandchildren.

Recently we commemorated the 120<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first Zionist Congress in Basel. Theodor Herzl changed the course of the Jewish nation and Jewish history at that event. He was exuberant at the conclusion of these three days and wrote in his diary: “In Basel I founded the Jewish State.” He predicted that in 50 years there would be a Jewish nation state. While he could not predict WWI, WWII, and the Shoah, he was basically correct. Unfortunately, he also predicted that when the State would be established anti-Semitism would end. In this case he was wrong, it continues around the world.

I don't know if we are on the road to redemption, I pray that we are. David ben Gurion, in an interview on CBS in October 1956, stated that “In Israel, in order to be a realist you must believe in miracles.” I agree, I do know that the miraculous does occur in Israel today. TV personality Conan O'Brien was filming a documentary film in Israel last week and spent a great deal of time talking to Israelis, including political leaders as he toured the country. One of his visits was to the Ziv Medical Center in Safed. There he saw many Syrian patients, victims of the Civil War, being treated by Israeli doctors. He told the doctors: “I am amazed and excited by what is being done here at Ziv for the sake of people from a neighboring country and an enemy, and I think you are the ones who need to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.”

With all the problems in Israel, Herzl could be very proud of what he initiated in Basel. The country is small, and yet has become an international powerhouse. Author Amos Oz noted that more people now speak Hebrew as their mother tongue than speak Danish, for example. They not only speak it, they work in it, create in it, and win awards in it. We can be proud of all the Israeli inventions, the high-tech endeavors, the medical advances, and the scholarly creativity. O'Brien, again, was very impressed with what he saw when he paid a surprise visit to the Tomorrow JLM hackathon where 40 teenagers spent 24 hours in Jerusalem's Tower of David designing and pitching smart- phone applications. Who could have predicted when Herzl stood up in Basel that approximately half the Jews of the world now live in Israel and the Jewish population there will soon surpass that of the Diaspora? Herzl would have been amazed at what he would see if he were alive today. He would be satisfied with much that has been done, but he would have been disappointed as well.

He would have been dismayed to see religious wars in Israel. The Kotel compromise is still not solved. While I was there the Conservative and Reform movements as well as Women of the wall approached the Supreme Court of Israel to demand that the government carry out the agreed upon compromise. He would have been disappointed to see Jews sitting on the streets in Jerusalem and many other cities with their hands out looking for coins. He would have been upset at many of the social policies which have made Israel a divided society between the haves and the have-nots. And I know he would have been disgusted by the lack of civil discourse on some very important issues pertaining to the Jewish people.

So while we may be at the beginning of the flowering of our redemption, we have a long way to go. The early Zionist thinkers stressed the concept of a “model society”, and we are not there

yet. Let us make no mistake about it, the emergence of the State of Israel in our very own lifetime is one of the greatest miracles and gifts to the Jewish people in our entire history. We are the beneficiaries of it and we have continued responsibilities for its welfare and its well-being. Yet we must do better. As the Torah suggests life is filled with blessings and curses. Based on our deeds, we bear the consequences of our actions. While I don't know whether we are on the path to redemption, I do believe that the miraculous does occur in Israel. Our challenge is to work as if everything depended upon us even as we pray that everything is dependent upon G-d. May the work of our hands be blessed and may G-d bless the State of Israel and the Jewish people.