

Escape and deny, and perhaps we can finally live in a utopia of our own perception

by rabbi judah dardik

Deuteronomy/Devarim 26:1-29:9

Haftarah: Isaiah 60:1-22

Make no mistake, this is not an easy Torah portion. Sure, it starts off well: talk of entering the land, harvests, first fruits and celebration. But Ki Tavo rapidly moves into what is known in Rabbinic literature as “Tochachah” – one of the two segments of the Torah that describe the awful tragedies that could befall the Jewish People and, as we know too painfully, did befall the Jewish people. For those that survived these nightmares it can bring back memories too difficult, and for the rest it can make one just want to stop reading and sit in silence.

The timing of this reading is deliberate. The Talmud (Megillah 31B) explains that when Ezra set up the system for Torah reading, he arranged it so that this portion would be read on the 2nd Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. This way, “the year and all its curses will come to a close” as we move into a new year and its blessings. (Reading immediately before Rosh Hashanah would feel too heavy, so it was placed one week earlier.)

The concept of leaving behind the year and all its pain is appealing, but enough life experience can dim one’s optimism. Didn’t we pray last Rosh Hashanah for a year of peace? For Israel and Darfur and Iraq? Didn’t we pray last year for good health for all our loved ones, finding that while thankfully some were healed, that didn’t include them all? Didn’t we pray for prosperity and wisdom, and find that we still could use a bit more? Has there ever been a year in which all of last year’s troubles were miraculously left behind?

Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik Z”L shared insight as he wrote, *“For the risk is great that man, driven by his innate tendency to immerse in spiritual joys, to keep away from himself the memory of any unpleasant sensation, to repress disturbing thoughts and to escape from a past that abounds in sorrow, will let the catastrophic event drift aimlessly in a vacuum without finding anchorage in the total personal experience...In consequence, man would, after meeting God in the whirlwind, return to his routine which operates exclusively at the level of affirmation, refusing stubbornly to relate itself to the negation”* (Out of the Whirlwind, pp.140-1).

It is human nature to try and run as far and as fast as we can from suffering. Our instincts direct us in no uncertain terms to be distant and pretend that none of this is nearby. Escape and deny, and perhaps we can finally live in a utopia of our own perception. Yet while it is tempting to avoid consideration of difficulty and pain, they play very real roles in life and cannot be shoved into a box and stored away as some “exception to the rule” that happened way back when.

Near the beginning of Tractate Berachot (7A), the Talmud interprets the verse from Ki Tisa in which Hashem says that “A person cannot see me and live” to mean that human beings cannot understand why life treats people differently, and still remain in this world. This is the great unanswered question, which our tradition maintains is not answerable so long as we are limited to human perspective. But why not? What would be so bad about understanding why the bad things happened?

Many explanations have been offered (none of which could ever truly comfort a person enduring the suffering itself), and there is one worth mentioning in this context. Rav Rabinovich, Rosh Yeshiva in Maale Adumim, pointed out that if we saw why bad things happened to people, we might not step in to help. If it all made cosmic sense to us, we could just let the universe follow its natural and understood course. We don’t like dealing with difficulty anyway. What then would be the point of our lives, if we were so smug and self assured that we couldn’t step in for the pain of another human being?

Rereading the Talmudic explanation of why we read our Torah portion shortly before Rosh Hashanah, I suspect that the wording was chosen with precision. Last year with its “curses”, its forces that were beyond my control or ability to impact, should come to an end. Will the new year be perfect? Probably not, but we can see start seeing that which is wrong as something to act on and not as some unstoppable curse that we can frown at as we walk away. As we head into the new year, we are reminded of one of the major reasons that we are here in the first place: to step in and help each other.

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