

Parshat Nitzavim
What Blessing? Which Curse?
Sarah Rosenberg - Class of 2025

Moshe declares that there are two possible futures for the Jewish people: one of blessings and one of curses. If we follow mitzvot, we will be rewarded with material abundance and sovereignty in our land. If we fail to obey G-d's word, we will be cursed with plague, pestilence, and exile. After prophesying these different paths, Moshe tells B'nei Yisrael the choice is theirs — they can choose whether the blessing or the curse will come to pass. He says:

העידותי בכם היום את־השמים ואת־הארץ החיים והמות נתתי לפניך הברכה והקללה ובחרת בחיים למען
תחיה אתה וזרעך:

I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day: I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life, in order that you and your offspring would live. (Devarim 30:19)

Yet, we read a few *psukim* earlier:

והיה כי־באו עליך כל־הדברים האלה הברכה והקללה אשר נתתי לפניך...

When all these things befall you—the blessing and the curse that I have set before you... (30:1)

The writer and critic Adam Kirsch notes in his book on modern Jewish literature, appropriately called *The Blessing and the Curse*, that it seems both parts of the prophecy, both the blessing and the curse, are destined to be fulfilled. Kirsch uses this *pasuk* to describe the whole of Jewish history, that we encounter eras of blessing and prosperity as well as eras of dispossession and terror. Moshe's charge to choose life isn't so simple. Perhaps this choice between life and death, blessings and curses, isn't actually a choice at all, but both are in our future.

Rabbi Adin Even-Israel Steinsaltz assumes a different position, that we *do* have a choice. He asks: do we see our Judaism as a blessing or a curse? Are we grateful to be Jewish, or is it simply a burden to bear?

The poet Heinrich Heine took a strong stance on this question. He described Judaism as “not a religion, but a curse.” It is no surprise, then, that Heine chose to be baptized, not out of a conviction that Christianity held any deep truth for him, but because he faced limitations and discrimination as a Jew in 19th century Germany. Rav Steinsaltz writes in his book *Talks on the Parsha*, “One may perceive one's Judaism as a kind of curse: Against one's will one lives, against one's will one dies, and against one's will one is a Jew.” *O! malchut shamayim*, the yoke of heaven, is too heavy to bear. The Torah is an inherited burden.

We may occasionally feel the yoke is too heavy, perhaps when we look longingly at a non-kosher restaurant's menu — and prices — or we may find our usual Shabbos routine stale. It's unrealistic to be content and to love our Jewish practice always, but once we start to see it as a weighty load, we risk adopting a similar attitude as Heine, that Judaism itself is a curse.

This time of year can feel like a particularly heavy burden. Rather than celebrating the new year with drinking and carousing, we're forced to confront deep faults in ourselves and reflect on how we can be better people. It's difficult work. It would be far more pleasant to hide our flaws rather than face them head on. But, as in so many other cases, this burden is for our own good: we must go against our natural inclinations and do what is necessary for self-improvement.

Elul, this month we're currently in, is an acronym for many things. One that is particularly resonant is ארון לוחות ושברי לוחות: the Ark, the tablets, and the broken tablets. The Talmud in Bava Batra 14b tells us the broken *luchot* were placed in the *Aron* alongside the whole ones. In the holiest of places, we face our mistakes. In fact, the broken *luchot* symbolize the greatest sin of all: idolatry.

This is one of the blessings of Judaism, that every year we are given a chance to begin anew and improve ourselves. Of course, this can happen any day, but we need an annual reminder because we, as humans, are forgetful and constantly risk falling into negative cycles. The shofar forces us to wake up and remember that we can always be doing better.

In Shemot Rabbah (46:1), we see a conversation between G-d and Moshe after Moshe breaks the *luchot*. He expresses sadness that he did so, but G-d comforts him by saying: No, the first set of *luchot* only contained the *Aseret HaDibrot*, the Ten Commandments, but this second set will contain *halacha*, *midrash*, *aggadah* — the whole of the Jewish canon. The Torah, then, was actually expanded by Moshe breaking the *luchot*. Through our mistakes, we received more. Though sometimes we may wish we still had the first *luchot*, and that we only need to follow the *Aseret HaDibrot* and nothing more, the richness of Jewish tradition is a blessing. Even if at times it feels overwhelming, let us remember that Judaism is a *bracha*.



Sarah Rosenberg came to Yeshivat Maharat after working with high school students at the Tikvah Fund. She received her B.A. from Johns Hopkins University in International Relations and History. Sarah planned to enter the world of Washington, D.C. think tanks after completing internships at various policy research institutions but decided during her senior year to instead pursue further her Jewish education. She then spent a year at the Pardes Institute of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem and discovered her love of beit midrash learning. Sarah lives in Manhattan and can be found baking challah, browsing used bookstores, and wrestling with Jewish texts.