

Parshat Ki Tavo: On Praying for Redemption

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The Gemara asks a question I find myself asking daily—why does God make people suffer? Why do bad things happen to good people? The Gemara answers: “God desires the prayer of the righteous” (Yevamot 64a). God needs our prayers.

Parshat Ki Tavo offers an explanation of the relationship between prayer and suffering.

The parsha begins with the Bikkurim ceremony, where Bnei Yisrael are obligated to donate and offer God the first of every fruit. Upon dedicating the fruit, we don't say a blessing thanking God for providing us with sustenance, rather, one recalls the suffering of the Jews in Egypt.

We cried out to the Lord, God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression. (Devarim 26:7)

וַנִּצְעַק אֶל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבוֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע יְהוָה אֶת קוֹלנוּ וַיִּרְא אֶת עַבְדוֹנוּ וְאֶת עֲמָלנוּ וְאֶת לְחַצְנוֹ: (דברים כו: ז)

God with a mighty outstretched arm, redeemed us from the depths of our affliction and suffering. Rambam, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* explains that recalling slavery is a core component of the Bikkurim ceremony, which would take place after Bnei Yisrael has conquered the land and settled in Eretz Yisrael. In his words: “This ceremony teaches man that it is essential in the service of Hashem to remember the times of trouble and the history of past distress, in days of comfort” (Moreh Nevuchim 3:39). At the very moment when the Jewish people are ensconced in the comfort of their new homes and want to show gratitude to God, it is essential to recall the historical experiences of Jewish suffering and distress. It is then that we must call out to God and cry.

Rebbe Nachman of Breslov explains that the wordless cry of distress is the deepest and most simple prayer (*Prayer* 5:4:7). Until this moment, until the Jews cried out to God, Ramban suggests, God's face was hidden. Only when God heard their cry, did God become cognizant of our suffering.

This cry is the cry of the shofar blasts. The Gemara in Rosh Hashana 34a, says that the *truah* sound that the shofar makes is the sound of wailing. It seems appropriate then that we read these verses in the month of Elul, days before Rosh Hashana. These verses also form the *magid* section of the haggadah that we read each Pesach. They serve as a reminder of our redemption from slavery in Egypt. We read the same verses again now to remind us that we need to cry out to God in the hopes that God will hear our pain and respond to our tefillot during these days of judgment. As a community, particularly at this time of year, we need to continue to cry out to God, in unison, and pray and hope that our tefilah will cause God to show God's face, and remove us from our *galut*, from our pain and suffering.



Rabba Sara Hurwitz, Co-Founder and President of Maharat, the first institution to ordain Orthodox women as clergy, also serves on the Rabbinic staff at the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale. Rabba Hurwitz completed Drisha's three-year Scholars Circle Program, an advanced intensive program of study for Jewish women training to become scholars, educators and community leaders. After another five years of study under the auspices of Rabbi Avi Weiss, she was ordained by Rabbi Weiss and Rabbi Daniel Sperber in 2009. In 2013 Rabba Hurwitz was awarded the Hadassah Foundation Bernice S. Tannenbaum prize, and the Myrtle Wreath Award from the Southern New Jersey Region of Hadassah in 2014. In 2016 she was the Trailblazer Award Recipient at UJA Federation of New York. She was named as one of Jewish Week's 36 Under 36, the Forward50 most influential Jewish leaders, and Newsweek's 50 most influential rabbis. In 2017 Rabba Hurwitz was chosen to be a member of the inaugural class of Wexner Foundation Field Fellows.