

Torah Weekly

WHEN BLESSINGS COME CLOAKED IN DARKNESS

A distillation of the Rebbe's talk on Jewish indignation, 1966.

Beyond Blessings

See that I am giving to you today a blessing and a curse. (Deuteronomy 11:26)

G-d gives blessings. But how is it conceivable that G-d gives curses? Isn't this the whole notion of our faith in a Creator—that therefore life is essentially purposeful and good?

Rather, at every moment, an endless current of divine creative energy streams into our world from the fountain of all delight and pleasure, sustaining all existence, providing life and sentience to all beings. That is good, the ultimate good.

At times, that energy comes measured and filtered to suit our world. So we perceive its goodness immediately and openly.

But at other times it comes below as it is above, from a place where goodness is understood on an infinitely higher and deeper plane than in our mundane and shallow world.

And so, like a mighty river of raw, unbridled energy that has broken through its dam, it rearranges the ecosystem of our reality with a fury. Nothing will go untouched; nothing will remain the same ever again.

If our world has been prepared for such a torrent—if the channels of our minds are opened wide and deep, our hearts softened as well-tilled soil—then these rains will come as a great blessing of life and joy. If not, they will appear as a curse. Until we will grow from them and learn to embrace them.

"In the heavens," the ancient Midrash tells, "there is no fire and brimstone."

"In the heavens," the ancient Midrash tells, "there is no fire and brimstone. Only for the earth do such things appear to come from there." And yet...yet there is something else.

Outrage

There are times when an intensely dark energy enters the world that even the most enlightened mind cannot begin to contain. A jolt from a place beyond grasping, from the very Core of Being that no creature can enter or perceive without surrendering its very existence.

Those are the times when we look at what is happening to us and to our world and nothing makes sense, when no justification suffices, when we recoil in horror and exclaim, "If there is a G-d, how could this be?"

G-d, it seems, does not require we understand Him in order that He

exist. If He did, after all, in what way would He be G-d?

G-d, it seems, does not require we understand Him in order that He exist.

So we do not understand. Instead, we are outraged—and justifiably so.

Yet, bereft of any other choice aside from our own oblivion, we choose to believe despite the vision of our eyes, to plow stubbornly forward through the thick, muddy darkness in the conviction that it must have some end, some meaning. We choose to suffer its bruises, lend it our blood, pour into it our streams of tears, allow it to break us, harden us, to expose the very core of our souls. Until its intense light may enter into our bones. We come to know the unknowable. The entire world becomes bathed in that knowledge.

That is the entire story of the Jewish people.

Confronting the Unknowable

How is it possible to know the unknowable? It cannot be told to us. Neither can we simply open our eyes and gaze upon it.

Only once we have swum through the rage of its deluge, suffered its scars, fallen with its brutal punches, confronted utter and absolute darkness in its own den and yet pushed forward with a power of our souls we never imagined we had, only then will it disclose to us the secret it holds within the eye of its storm.

Only once we have confronted absolute darkness in its own den...

At that time, we will look in our rearview mirror and see the road behind and it will be all good, only good, the ultimate good. Which is why we must be told to "see" and not simply to know or understand:

"Open your eyes and look deeper, much deeper," G-d is telling us, "and you will see inside each curse blessings you could never have imagined. For all the pain and all the sorrow, the loneliness, the confusion, the darkness, all that has come upon you was only a cloak for My endless love for you, My desire to bring you close to Me."

Holy Indignation

Now we can understand a story, one that is told over a seven-week period every year:

During the three weeks of summer leading up to the ninth of Av, the day that marks the destruction of Jerusalem and the beginning of our long exile, we read each Shabbat a different prophecy of that calamity and the suffering that ensued in its wake. Then, beginning the Shabbat after the ninth of Av, for seven weeks, we read each Shabbat a different prophecy of consolation and comfort.

The standard comprehensive Jewish code for all things liturgical is that of Rabbi David Avudraham (14th century, Seville). After recording all the haftarat for the year, he cites a tradition concerning these seven weeks of consolation. He explains how the first line of each haftarah tells another chapter of a story, of an interchange between G-d and the Jewish people.

At first, G-d instructs the prophets that enough gloom and doom has been spoken and now they must go to "Console, console My people."

But the next week, we find the people are not consoled. They want to know why G-d has sent His prophets to do the job. Why will He not comfort them Himself? "And Zion will say, 'G-d has forsaken me, G-d has forgotten me!'" So, on the third Shabbat, we read the prophets reporting back to G-d, "The tempestuous, suffering soul is not comforted."

And indeed, on the fourth Shabbat, we read G-d's words to His people, "I, yes I, am the one to console you." This continues for two more weeks with consolation in G-d's own voice: "Rejoice, oh barren one who has not yet given birth!" "Arise and shine, for your light has come!"

Only then do we read, on the seventh and final week, of our joy and celebration in having heard directly from G-d: "Rejoice, I will rejoice in G-d!"

PARSHAT RE'EH

2-8 August
19-25 Av

Re'eh: Deuteronomy 11:26 - 16:17
Isaiah 54:11 - 55:5

Calendars

We have Jewish Calendars. If you would like one, please send us a letter and we will send you one, or ask the Rabbi/Chaplain to contact us.

Family Programs

Do you have family on the outside struggling? Please contact or have them contact our office to learn more about our family programs. You and they are not alone, we are here to help.

Grape Juice & Matzah

We offer free Grape Juice and Matzah for you to be able to make the blessings every Shabbos. Please have your chaplain / Rabbi contact us to enroll (available to all prisons).

Sacred material please do not desecrate

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**ALEPH
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No One Alone,
No One Forgotten.

So why is it so distressing to be comforted by the prophets? They will tell us that our suffering has a happy ending. Yet more, it will be a double-consolation—"Console, console." We will then see how all the suffering pays off in the end, because it brought us forgiveness and made us worthy. But we will not accept that.

"For this we swam against the raging waves of a bitter ocean for two thousand years?"

"For this we swam against the raging waves of a bitter ocean for two thousand years? For this we were crucified, slaughtered and threw ourselves in the fire in Your name? For this we witnessed such unspeakable trauma as no other nation on earth, simply because we are Your people?"

"All this was nothing more than a punishment for our sins, a cleansing of our souls? No! That cannot be!"

To which G-d responds, "You are right.

"The darkness was not a monster sent to punish you. Neither was it meant as a cleansing alone.

"It was I, it was the shadow of My very essence and being, as we came close to one another so that we might embrace."

Lifting the Veil

But if that is the explanation, why then must G-d wait for us to protest? Why can't He reveal this truth from the outset? Because, as we have just learned, we are speaking of the unknowable, of the very essence of G-d's being. It is not a thing that can be told. Not a thing that even the greatest prophet can perceive.

Except...except through the struggle and the outrage, the scream of indignation, the cry that G-d has no right to abandon us, that He could not possibly have brought this upon us without some unimaginable, incomprehensible explanation that only He Himself can provide, and must provide. That itself is a recognition that He is there.

With that itself, we begin to lift the veil.

By Tzvi Freeman

PIRKEI AVOT

"The world was created by means of ten [Divine] utterances." (5:1)

QUESTION: The Gemara (Rosh Hashanah 32b) asks that in the Torah discussion of the creation it says "vayomer" — "and He said" — only nine times? The Gemara answers, "Bereishit nami ma'amhar hu" — "[The creation of heavens and earth in the verse] 'in the beginning' was also done through an utterance, as it says, 'By the word of G-d the heavens were made' " (Psalms 33:6).

Why doesn't it say clearly "vayomer" — "G-d said [there should be heavens and earth]"?

ANSWER: Heavens and earth were created *yeish mei'ayin* — *ex nihilo* — and all the things generated from heavens and earth were also created at the same time. Each thing, however, was placed in its permanent position and given its function on the day upon which it was decreed for it to serve the world. This is indicated by the superfluous word "et" in the phrase "et hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz" — "the heavens and the earth" (Bereishit 1:14, Rashi).

The word "vayomer" — "and He said" — fits only when one is speaking to something or someone. Thus, all the instances of "vayomer" were to something already in existence and it was a command that it begin to function or go into position. However, since the initial heavens and earth were created *ex nihilo*, and there was no one or nothing to speak to, the word "vayomer" was not used, although their coming into existence was indeed through a specific utterance from Hashem.

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 19 Av, 5786 – 2 August, 2026

Passing of Rabbi Yaakov Culi (1732)

Born in Jerusalem in 1689 (5449?), Yaakov Culi moved to Constantinople, Turkey, where he found adequate facilities and financial backing to publish the scholarly output of his learned grandfather, Rabbi Moses ibn Habib, including classics such as *Get Pashut* and *Ezrat Nashim*.

The brilliant young scholar quickly came to the attention of the chief rabbi of Constantinople, Yehuda Rosanes, the undisputed leader of Sephardic Jewry at the time, and he was appointed to the *beth din* (rabbinical court).

Upon the passing of Rosanes, Rabbi Yaakov edited and published his late teacher's writings with his own additional glosses: *Mishneh Lamelech* on Maimonides's *Mishneh Torah* and *Perishat Derachim*.

Toward the end of his own short life, Rabbi Culi began work on the *Mea'am Loez*, a compendium of rabbinic lore and commentary on all books of Scriptures. He wrote in Ladino, then the common language of the Sephardic diaspora.

Unfortunately, he never completed his project and passed away on 19th Av, 5492 (1732), having only completed the book *Genesis* and most of *Exodus*. However, subsequent scholars used his extensive notes to finish the work. Popular to this day, the *Mea'am Loez* has been translated into many languages, including Hebrew, English, and even Arabic.

Monday, 20 Av, 5786 – 3 August, 2026

Zohar Published (1558)

First printing of the *Zohar*, the fundamental work of the Kabbalah (Jewish esoteric and mystical teachings), authored by the Talmudic sage, Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai.

Passing of R. Levi Yitzchak Schneerson (1944)

Av 20 is the *yahrtzeit* (anniversary of the passing) of the Lubavitcher Rebbe's father, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak Schneerson (1878-1944), in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak was Chief Rabbi of Yekaterinoslav (currently Dnepropetrovsk), and was arrested and exiled to Kazakhstan by the Stalinist regime as a result of his work to preserve Jewish life in the Soviet Union.

Tuesday, 21 Av, 5786 – 4 August, 2026

Passing of R. Chaim Brisker (1918)

Passing of Rabbi Chaim Soloveichik of Brisk (1853-1918), outstanding Talmudic scholar and Jewish leader.

Wednesday, 22 Av, 5786 – 5 August, 2026

Passing of R. Mordechai ben Hillel (1298)

R. Mordechai ben Hillel was a prominent scholar who lived in Nuremberg, Germany. He authored a famous halachic compendium known as *Mordechai*, included in all standard printings of the Talmud. R. Mordechai, his wife, and five children were killed in the notorious *Rindfleisch* massacres (see entry for 7 Iyar), on 22 Menachem Av, 5058 (1298).

Friday, 24 Av, 5786 – 7 August, 2026

Hasmonean Holiday (circa 100 BCE)

The Hasmoneans reinstated the rule of Jewish civil law, replacing Hellenist secular law, and declared this day a holiday.