## Ki Tavo – Selected Shorts Number 45: Triplets and the Blessings of Curses Rabbi Eliot Malomet August 28, 2021 20 Elul 5781

דברים כייו:בי וְלָקחָתָּ מֵרֵאשִׁית ו כָּל־פְּרֵי הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר תָּבָיא מַאַרְצְתָּ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלָקֵידְ נַתַן לָהַ וְשֹׁמְתָ בַשָּׁנָא וְהָלֹכְתָּ אֶל־הַמָּלוֹם אַשֵׁר יִבַחַר ה' אֵלֹקִידְ לִשְׁמֵן שֵׁמוּ שֵׁם:

**Deuteronomy 26:2** you shall take some of every first fruit of the soil, which you harvest from the land that the LORD your God is giving you, put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God will choose to establish His name. With teneh basket, makes its first appearance here. An Egyptian loan word, the description of this ritual encodes deep symbolism: bringing first-fruits is the culmination of the liberation from Egypt. In the Mishnah the receptacle goes by the word 50sal (a word from Akkadian), which occurs more frequently in the Bible. This is all about the story. Liberation gives you a story; freedom is the ability to harvest first fruits and tell your story.

דברים כ״ו:ה׳ וְעָנִית וְאָמַרְתָּ לִפְנֵי וּ ה' אֱלֹקֶׁיהּ אֲרַמָּי אֹבֵד אָבִי וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיְמָה וַיֶּגֶר שֶׁם בִּמְתַי מְעֵט וְיְהִי־שֶׁׁם **לְּגוֹי גָּדוֹל עָצָוּם** וַרָב:

Deuteronomy 26:5 You shall then recite as follows before the LORD your God: "My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but he became there a nation, great, mighty in number, and many. A triple adjective, but what is encoded here? Origin and a destiny of triumph. God's original promise to Abraham was that he will be a אוי גדול ועצום a nation great and mighty in number (Gen. 18:18) and Pharaoh's first observation about Israel was that they were לצום wighty in number and many more than us (Exod. 1:9). This set of three adjectives in the prilgrim's script conflates God's original promise Israel's eventual triumph in Egypt.

דברים כ״ו:ז׳ וַנִּצְעֵּק אֶל־ה' אֱלֹקֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמֵע ה' אֶת־לְלֵנוּ וַיֵּרֵא אֶת־עְנְיָנָוּ וְאֶת־עְמָלֵנוּ וְאֶת־לַחַצֵנוּ:

**Deuteronomy 26:7** We cried to the LORD, the God of our fathers, and the LORD heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. Another triple. What's encoded in this phrase? The Burning Bush (Exod. 3:7), but there God sees first then hears: I saw the plight of My people and I have heard their cries...I have seen their oppression (3:9). Here, God hears then sees.  $\forall u$  and  $\forall u$  are terms of oppression in the Burning Bush episode but עמל is missing; instead there you have the term מכאוב. Curiosity: both terms occur as "brackets" in the first chapter of Kohelet. Hmmm....what to make of that?

> דברים כייו:חי וַיּוֹצְאַנוּ ה' מִמְצְרַיִם בְּיָד חָזֶקֵה וּבִזְרַעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְמֹרָא גָּזְל וּבְאֹתָוֹת וּבְמֹפְתִים:

**Deuteronomy 26:8** The LORD freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. **Hand, arm,** and **power** are another triple, modified by adjectives **mighty, outstretched,** and **awesome.** What's encoded here? Gary Rendsburg has pointed out that mighty hand and outstretched arm is a creative cultural appropriation that inverts the depiction of a victorious Pharaoh.



Depiction of Rameses II in "pharaonic stance" in the Abu Simbel temple. Note the "mighty hand and outstretched arm." Perhaps the *awesome power*, *signs and portents* are also means of ironic inversions of

Deuteronomy 26:15 Look down from Your holy abode, from heaven, and bless Your people Israel and the soil You have given us, a land flowing with milk and honey, as You swore to our fathers. "הָשָׁלֶיפָה" is an interesting word, this is its only occurrence in the Bible. The root שָׁקָיפָה sounds a lot like "scope" an ocular instrument. The person says this standing in the Temple which is God's thereby linking the "heavenly abode" and the "earthly abode" while invoking God's blessings over Israel. דברים כייו:יייט וּלְתִתְּךָ עֵלְיוֹן עַל כָּל־הַגוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר עָשָׁה לתְהָלָה

וּלְשָׁם וּלְתַפְאָרֵת וְלָהְיָתְהָ עַם־קָדָשׁ לָה' אֵלְקֵיךָ בָּאָשֶׁר דְבָר: Deuteronomy 26:19 and that He will set you, in fame and renown and glory, high above all the nations that He has made; and that you shall be, as He promised, a holy people to the LORD your God. אָשׁמָד, אָלָהִים בָּן הָהַלָּתוֹ לספָר בָּצִיון שָׁם ה וֹתָהַלָּתוֹ לספָר בָּצִיון שָׁם ה וֹתָהַלָּתוֹ נוָדָרָרְפָי וִיבְרָהְ פָּרְבָּשִׁר שָׁם קַדָּשׁוֹ וֹתָפָר מָיָדָרָפָי וִיבָרָ is another wordpair. This triple boosts the power of these two pairs: Israel's renown is due to its praiseworthiness and its ability to bring glory. The triple occurs in the first stanza of Lekha Dodi.

## **BLESSED BE THE POETICS OF CURSES**

If a good way to kill a joke is to analyze it, a good way to neutralize the sting of a curse is to explore the beauty of its poetics. Here are some examples: דברים כ״ח:כ׳

וּבוּים כיוּוּ.כ (כ) יְשָׁלֵח ה' ו בְּהָ אֶת־הַשְּׁאֵרֶה אַת־הַשְּׁאֵרֶה אַת־הַשְּׁאֲרֶה אַת־הַשָּׁאֲרֶה בְּכָל־מִשְׁלֵח יִדָּהָ אַשֶׁר מַצַעָּה עַ<mark>ד</mark> הִשְׁמֵּרְ וַעַ<mark>ד</mark>-אָב<mark>ָר</mark>ָה מָהָר מִפְּגֵי וַ עַ מְעֵלָלֶיה אֲשָׁעָר אַזַבְתָּנִי:

## **Deuteronomy 28:20**

(20) The LORD will let loose against you calamity, panic, and frustration in all the enterprises you undertake, so that you shall soon be utterly wiped out because of your evildoing in forsaking Me. Lots of alliterations. מארה מהנימ מארה משלח השמדך מהר מפני מעלליך This strengthens the beat of that first line, which is a triplet. Calamity, panic, and frustration. (JPS) Curse, confusion, reproach (Fox) Blight, panic and disaster. (Alter): Curse, tumult and anno-yance, (Friedman): Note the strong T sounds and the inversion ער-רע in the words אנערת משלח.



Deuteronomy 28:22 The LORD will strike you with consumption, fever, and inflammation, with scorching heat and drought, with blight and mildew; they shall hound you until you perish. Internal rhyming with שָׁחָפָת and חַדָּכַּוֹן; דְּלָקָת and שָׁהָכָר Assonance of הָרָב hourd הַרָהָר גבחרם constraints in this series of maladies we have a triplet, a pair and a pair, (7 in all) the first three (*consumption, fever and inflammation*) happen to the body, the fourth, הרחר, afflicts the body but is also external to it, and the last three are heat afflictions of the land.

דברים כייח:כייח יַכְּהַה הְ בְּשֶׁגְּשׁוָן וּבְעַוְרָוֹן וּרְתָמְהוֹן לְבֵב' Deuteronomy 28:28 The LORD will strike you with madness, blindness, and dismay. Another devastating triplet of psychological afflictions, disorders, and traumas.

דברים כיית:כיים וְהָיִיתָ מְמֹשֵׁשׁ בְּצְהָרִיִם כַּאֲשֶׁר יְמֹשֵׁשׁ הַעְוּר בָּאֲפַלָּה וְלָא תַצְלִים אֶת־דְּרָכֵידְ וְהָיִיתָ אָד עָשְׁוּק וְגָזוּל כָּל־ הַיָּמִים וְאֵין מוֹשֶׁיעַ:

Deuteronomy 28:29 You shall grope at noon as a blind man gropes in the dark; you shall not prosper in your ventures, but shall be totally abused and robbed, with none to give help. Bibilcal trivia: what is the one other location in the Bible where you find the phrase, totally וְּהָיִיתָ Poeut. 16:15 in reference to the holiday of Sukkot, in reference to total joy: וְשָׁמַחָרָ אַך שָׁמָם וְשָׁמַחָהָ...וְהָיִיתָ אָך שָׁמָם site to the total joy you experience on Sukkot.

דברים כ״ח:ל״ז וְהָיֵיתָ לְשֵׁמֶּה לְמָשֵׁל וְלְשְׁנִינֶה בְּכֹל הַעַמִּים אַשִׁר־יִנהַגָּדָ ה' שֵׁמֵה:

Deuteronomy 28:37 You shall be a consternation, a proverb, and a byword among all the peoples to which the LORD will drive you. Score another triple here for שָׁמָה וְלְשָׁנְיְנָה not to mention some alliteration the anagram לשמה-למשל and wordplay: שָׁמָה as consternation and as place (to which God will drive you).

## דברים כייח:סייח

(סח) וָהֵשִׁיבְהָּ ה' ו מִצְרֵיִם בָּאָנִיוֹת בַדֶּרֶהְ אֲשֶׁר אָמֵרְתִּי לְהָ לֹא־ תֹסִיף עַזד לְרְאֹתֵה וְהַתִּמּכַּרְמֶּם שָׁם לְאֹיְבֶידְ לַצְבָדִים וְלֹשְׁפָחֻוֹת וְאֵין לְגֵה:

**Deuteronomy 28:68** The LORD will send you back to Egypt in galleys, by a route which I told you you should not see again. There you shall offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as male and female slaves, but none will buy. Possibly the worst curse ever: you will go back to Egypt, and you will be so undesirable, no one will even buy you as a slave. You will be without shelter or sustenance, and worse, your whole story of liberation will be undone; you won't have a story! How to live without a story? There is a counterpoint of comfort in the Haftarah:

ישעיהו ס׳:ג׳ וְהָלְכָוּ גוֹיָם לְאוֹרֵךְ וּמְלָכִים לְנְגָה זַרְחֵךְ: Isaiah 60:3 And nations shall walk by your light, Kings, by your shining radiance. Shabbat Shalom!