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Deuteronomy. The list includes famine, disease, and all other manners of devastation. According to these chapters, the curses that follow are the inevitable result of Israel's sin, especially breaking the covenant and disobeying God. Such threats and their supporting ideology are, at first glance, anathema to us. Readers cringe when reading the lists. Over the years, I have come to know many a rabbi who bemoaned these chapters, saying, "WHAT am I going to say about THIS text on Shabbat?"

But before we toss out Deuteronomy, let's be clear about the Deuteronomic claims. Deuteronomy maintains that the various disasters, the "curses," are not simply natural phenomena to be endured passively. They are contingent upon the behavior of the society. The underlying presumption is that the moral society, constructed along the lines the Tanakh commands, uses its human and natural resources responsibly. The respectful use of land and the compassionate care for the disenfranchised create and sustain a healthy society. And that is what secures the entire world. When a society fails to construct an equitable life-support system, the entire ecosystem suffers and disaster follows.

Epidemics, according to Deuteronomy, are not accidents. They signal, on some level, human disregard for the physical, religious and moral aspects of life. It is tempting to read these threats from Deuteronomy as another case of simplistic theological cause and effect. Even worse, it has been possible to use the curses as another chilling excuse for blaming the victim, claiming that those who suffer must have done something to deserve their fate. This misguided theology and ideology represents the outlook of Job's friends in the Book of Job. Responding to the death of Job's children, one so-called comforter states: "If your sons sinned against Him, He dispatched them for their transgression" (Job 8:4; JPS). God, however, unambiguously chastises these friends for their position (see Job 42:7).

To attribute this simplistic perspective to Deuteronomy is to misread. Deuteronomy is not proclaiming a simple, individual cause-and-effect theology. For Deuteronomy, the world remains an interlocking system, governed by a just and compassionate God who cares deeply for those in the world, and who is trying to shake those of us who are part of the covenant to care and to take care as well. Moses is addressing those about to "arrive" ("When you enter the land," *ki tavo*, Deuteronomy 26:1). By listing the diseases and disasters that would follow disobedience, Deuteronomy is essentially saying to those who have arrived, or who are on the verge of arriving, "When you come to the land, you have the privilege and the power to make a difference. You have arrived. Your life as an individual is woven into the larger fabric, for which you are also responsible." It claims that suffering individuals in our midst are evidence not of their own transgressions, but of the corporate, communal failure to build a healthy society of economic covenant. Deuteronomy therefore urges those among us who have arrived to monitor ourselves and our communities, to care and to act. Optimistically, it assumes that we are capable of doing just that.

Many of us remain troubled by the picture of wholesale punishment for the crimes of the few. We cringe at the prospect that the innocent perish along with the guilty. Yet, when we look around us, we must admit that today, as in our past, we are living in a world where countless people suffer because of the crimes of the few. The few, in many ways exemplified by those of us privileged to live in North America and Western Europe, are the cause of so much that is economically rejected by the rest of the world. We help perpetuate disease not by wanton transmission and infection (as was once the case), but because we have not devoted nearly enough of ourselves or of our vast resources to creating solutions. We have not taken responsibility.

Inadvertently and without our consent we in fact exemplify the phenomenon that Deuteronomy describes. Our ancestors explained this perspective through theological language in which God plays a direct role, and sought to remedy it by invoking the fear and love that the relation with God can generate. By recognizing these diseases and disasters as communal problems, the ancients learned to lift from the individual the guilt that is so often attached to suffering. They made it clear that the source is not with the lone sufferer, but those who have the means and options to make a difference yet fail to do so.

In Memoriam

Maria Bamberger, dear wife of the late Dr. Fritz Bamberger, HUC-JIR faculty member and advisor to Presidents Nelson Glueck and Alfred Gottschalk. A dramatic presence in Israel, she was instrumental in the founding of our Jerusalem campus and her life, together with Fritz, reflected an abiding devotion to HUC-JIR.

Leah Fishbane, beloved wife of our colleague, Eitan Fishbane. Her memory is a source of blessing.

Lisa Goldberg, beloved wife of John Sexton, President of New York University, was tireless in her resourcefulness and personal advocacy on behalf of others. She was a catalyst for change through her singular leadership at the Revson Foundation.

Teddy Kollek, inspiring statesman, visionary, and honorary alumnus of HUC-JIR, was ever mindful of the prophetic tradition and the words of Nehemiah, "With one hand we build and with one hand we protect." His life reflected his courage and determination to establish Jerusalem as a home of peace and harmony in the hearts of all people.