

# Zera Shimshon

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Published Mantua 1778\*

## Chapter LI: Nitzavim (Deut. 29:9–30:20)

Essay 5. The life and the goodness, the death and the misfortune

**פסוק** "ראה נתתי לפניך היום את־החיים ואת־הטוב ואת־המָוֹת [ואת־הרע]". קִשָּׁה שֶׁהִנֵּה לוֹ לומר מתחלה "את־המָוֹת ואת־הרע" ואחר כך "את־החיים ואת־הטוב", דִּהְיִי אֲמַרְיִנוּ בְּמִדְרָשׁ שִׁיְצַחֵק אָמַר "אֲרַרְיִךְ אֲרוּר וּמְבַרְכִיךָ בְּרוּךְ" וּבְלִעָם אָמַר לְהַפִּיךְ, לְפִי שֶׁהַצְּדִיקִים תְּחִלָּתוֹן יִיסוּרִין וְסוֹפְנוֹ שְׁלוֹמָה וְהַרְשָׁעִים תְּחִלָּתוֹן שְׁלוֹמָה וְסוֹפְנוֹ יִיסוּרִין.

There is a verse: **“See, I set before you today the life and the goodness, the death [and the misfortune]”** (Deut. 30:15). **This is difficult, it should have said, “the death and the misfortune” at the beginning, and afterwards “the life and the goodness.”** Why? For thus, it is written in the midrash, Gen. Rabbah 66:4, that Isaac said, **“Accursed be they who curse you, blessed they who bless you,”**<sup>1</sup> but Balaam said the opposite,<sup>2</sup> because the righteous start with sufferings and end with tranquility, whereas the wicked begin with tranquility and end with sufferings.

וְיִשׁ לומר דִּהְיִי לֹא הִנֵּה אֶפְשָׁר לומר תְּחִלָּה "את־המָוֹת ואת־הרע", דָּאֵם כּוֹן הִנֵּה מִשְׁמַע שְׁלֹאֲחֵר שְׁבָא הִרַע יֵשׁ תְּקִנָּה לְזִכּוֹת בְּטוֹב, וְזֶה אֵינּוּ שְׁלֵעוּלָם צְרִיךְ שֶׁהָאָדָם יִקְדִּים תְּפִלָּה לְצָרָה, וְעוֹד אֲמַרְיִנוּ דָּלֵת הַגְּנֻעֵלֵת לֹא בְּמִהְרָה תִּפְתַּח, וּמִשׁוּם הִכִּי הַקְּדִים הַחַיִּים וְהַטוֹב שִׁיְדַבֵּק בְּאֵלּוֹ קוֹדֵם שִׁיְבּוֹא הִרַע חָס וְשָׁלוֹם.

**It can be said that here it's not possible to first say, “the death and the misfortune,” for if so, it would mean that after the misfortune comes, there's a remedy to merit good. That is not [the case], for someone should always say a prayer before trouble [arrives].**<sup>3</sup> **It also says, “a door that is locked will not be opened quickly,”**<sup>4</sup> and because of this, the life and the goodness must precede [the death and the misfortune in the verse], such that one will adhere to these, life and goodness, before the misfortune will come into a person's life, G-d forbid.

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<sup>1</sup> Gen 27:29.

<sup>2</sup> Num. 24:9, “Blessed are they who bless you; accursed they who curse you!”

<sup>3</sup> In the first essay for Chayei Sarah, we read: “Charity needs to always be [given] before judgment comes [upon the giver], because we don't placate someone at the time of his anger (Pirkei Avot 4:18).” I.e., if G-d is angry at a person, that isn't the time to try to placate Him. That principle would also apply to prayer.

<sup>4</sup> Bava Kamma 80b.

ועוד יש להקשות על הפסוק דלפי מאי דאמרין בפרק קמא דמענית דכי יהיב רחמנא שובעא לחיי הוא דיהיב לא הנה, צריך קרא למימר אלא ראה נתתי לפניך הטוב, דכשנש הטוב בנדאי יש החיים. ולמה כתב נמי "את־החיים"?

**We can also question the verse according to the first chapter of tractate Ta'anit (page 8b), "as when the Merciful One provides plenty, He gives it for [the sake of] the living." Thus, Scripture needed to say only, "See, I set before you today the goodness," for when there is the goodness, certainly there will be the life! So why does it also say "the life"?**

וגיש לומר לפי שהרשעים קרויים מתים ותפלתן אינה נשמעת כדכתיב "ובפרשכם פפיקם" וכו' "מי־בקש זאת מידכם" וכו'? ואם כן צריך מתחלה שהאדם יבקש לו חיים עם התשובה, ד'נשב ורפא לו' כתיב, ואחר כך יתפלל שיבוא לו הטוב שאז תהיה תפלתו נשמעת.

**It can be said that the wicked are called "dead,"<sup>5</sup> and their prayers are not heard,<sup>6</sup> as it is written, "And when you lift up your hands, I will turn My eyes away from you; Though you pray at length, I will not listen. Your hands are stained with crime."<sup>7</sup> "Who requested this from your hands?"<sup>8</sup> I.e., G-d is asking rhetorically, "Did I request prayers and sacrifices from sinners?" That being the case, it is necessary from the start that the man will request life with the repentance, for "repent and be healed"<sup>9</sup> is written. In other words, if a wicked person is considered dead, the verse is telling him, repent and choose life! That's why the verse includes "the life." Afterward, i.e., after repenting and no longer being in the category of an unrepentant sinner, then he should pray that the goodness will come to him, for then his prayer will be heard.**

ועדיין יש לדקדק דבשלמא רישיה דקרא ניקא שמתחלה יתן לו החיים ואחר כך יוסיף לתת לו הטוב ומשום הכי אמר קרא את־החיים ואת־הטוב. אבל סיפיה דקרא לא ניקא ד"את־המנות ואת־הרע" משמע שאחר המנות יתן לו הרע וזה אי אפשר דלאחר שמת אינו יודע עוד בין טוב לרע. ואין לומר דמירי בעונש עולם הבא בגיהנם דהא פשיטיה דקרא מירי בעולם הזה ונקא.

**We still need to check [this]: Granted, at the beginning of the verse, it's convenient to our understanding, that from the beginning, He gives [the repentant sinner] the life, and afterward, He gives him the goodness, and because of this, the verse says, "the life and the goodness." But the end of the verse is not convenient to our understanding, for [it says] "the death and the misfortune," meaning that after death He will give him the misfortune. In this World, this is impossible, for after death, he will not know between goodness and misfortune. You can't say that it's speaking of punishment in the World to Come, in Gehenna, for it's obvious that the verse is specifically talking about this World.**

<sup>5</sup> Berachot 18b.

<sup>6</sup> Prov. 15:29.

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 1:15.

<sup>8</sup> Isaiah 1:12.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 6:10.

וְגַם לֹאמַר דְּפִנּוֹנַת הַכֶּתוּב הִיא כֹּה, שְׁלִפְעָמִים יִתֵּן לּוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ מִיָּד וְלִפְעָמִים יִהְיֶה לּוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ אַחֵר יִיסוּרֵין קָשִׁים וְרַעִים שֶׁהֵם מֵרַמְּנוֹת. וְהֵינּוּ דִתְנִן בְּעַל כְּרִתְהָ אִתָּהּ הִי בְּעַל כְּרִתְהָ אִתָּהּ מֵת, וְכֵן בְּפֶרֶק ג' דְּכִתּוּבוֹת אֱלֹהֵי נְבֻזַדְנֶזַר לְחַנּוּנָהּ מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל וְעֹזְרֶיהָ פְּלָחוּ לְצִלְמָא. וְכֵן בְּפֶרֶק ז' דְּמִצְוֵיֵא אֵי מְקַטְלֵי לְהֵוּא גְבָרָא, לֹא מְגַלִּינָא, וְאֵי נְגוּדֵי מְנַגְדֵי לִיה, מְגַלִּינָא. וְכֵן בְּמִתְאֻוּנָיִם, רְשָׁעִים הֵיוּ מִצְטַעְרִים וְהוֹלְכִים "עַד חֹדֶשׁ יָמִים" וְהַפְּשָׁרִים מֵתוּ מִיָּד, וְאֵי רִישֵׁיה דְּקָרָא מִתְפָּרֵשׁ הֵי כֵן ל'.

**It can be said that the intent of the second part of the verse is thus: that sometimes He gives [the sinner] death immediately, and sometimes he will have death after difficult and bad sufferings that are worse than death. It was taught that “against your will you live, against your will you will die,”**<sup>10</sup> i.e., a person doesn’t choose the time (or conditions) of his death, or how much suffering he will experience beforehand.

**Also in the third chapter of tractate Ketubot (32b),** the rabbis discussed that, “Perhaps [the punishment of] lashes is [more] severe [than the threat of death], as Rav said: **Had they flogged Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah, they would have worshipped an idol.**” The men had refused to bow to an image of Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, and they were then thrown into a fiery furnace. They were saved by a miracle.<sup>11</sup> Rav is suggesting that the threat of a quick death from the furnace was not enough to make them worship an idol, but the fear of lashes might have been enough.

**Also, in the seventh chapter of tractate Bava Metzia (86a),** we find that a messenger sent word to Rabba bar Nachmani, “**I will leave this [inn and will not disclose your location]. [Even] if they will kill that man [i.e., me], I will not disclose [your location]. But if they will beat him [i.e., me], I will disclose [your whereabouts, as I cannot bear being tortured].**”

**Also, in the section of the Torah talking about the Israelites complaining** bitterly about not having meat,<sup>12</sup> **the wicked suffered continuously “for an entire month,”**<sup>13</sup> **but the proper ones died immediately,**<sup>14</sup> **and even the beginning of the verse is interpreted thus, as above,** that the sinner is considered dead, and he should repent and choose life, and then his prayers for goodness will be heard and answered.

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<sup>10</sup> Pirkei Avoit 4:22.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel, chapter 3.

<sup>12</sup> Num. 11:1.

<sup>13</sup> Num. 11:19–20, “You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but an entire month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the L-rd who is among you, by whining before Him and saying, ‘Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!’ ”

<sup>14</sup> Num. 11:33, “The meat was still between their teeth, nor yet chewed, when the anger of the L-rd blazed forth against the people and the L-rd struck the people with a very severe plague.” The translator has not identified a source that the fit ones died immediately, and Sforno comments that the ones who had said, “Why did we leave Egypt” died immediately, even before the meat reached their stomachs, and that the month of suffering was for those who had complained without actually having experienced a craving for meat. However, in Num. 11:15, Moses was so aggrieved by the complaints of the people that he beseeched G-d, “If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!” Thus, one can understand that someone might prefer a quick death to a prolonged torment.