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## Parshat Ki Tavo

### HENDIADYS IN THE PRE-SHOFAR ACROSTIC PRAYER: AN INTRODUCTION TO AN OVERLOOKED PRINCIPLE OF BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

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**B**efore we blow the shofar on Rosh Hashanah, we recite six verses that generate the acrostic *kerá satan* – tear up the [evil decrees of the] Satan. The first verse (with initial letter ק) is Eikhah 3:56: “*Koli shamata, al ta’ilem aznekha le-ravhati le-shav’ati.*”

The first five words are easily translated: “You have heard my voice. Do not hide Your ear.” The last word, *le-shav’ati*, means “to my cry.”<sup>1</sup> But what about that word *le-ravhati*?

The root of this word is *resh-vav-het*. A little background on this root is necessary.

In Genesis 32:17, we are told that Jacob instructed that a *revah* be placed between each of his flocks. From the context, it is evident that *revah* means “space.”

Another use of this word is found in the book of Esther. There (4:14), Mordechai tells Esther that if she refuses to help, *revah* and *hatzalah* will arise for the Jews from another place. The word *revah* there is usually translated as “relief.” This expands its original meaning “space”, as confinement causes distress.<sup>2</sup>

There is also the word *ruah*, which has meanings such as “breath,” “air,” and “wind.” It contains the same consonants as *revah* but is vocalized

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps *le-shav’ati* is best translated as “cry for relief,” as it may derive from the root *yod-shin-ayin* (help, save, deliver). See E. Klein, *A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language for Readers of English* (1987), 646.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., the comments of S.D. Luzzatto on Exodus 8:11 where the related noun *harvahah* is used.

differently.<sup>3</sup>

Now let us return to our word *le-ravhati*.

The Jewish Publication Society of America 1917 translation of Eikhah translates this as “at my sighing.” Many others take this approach, including the 2000 edition of the Koren Tanakh. This translation bases itself on the “breath” meaning of the word *ruah*. A “sighing” of distress would nicely parallel “my cry.” But *le-ravhati* is vocalized in a manner that indicates that it is from the word *revah*, and not the word *ruah*.<sup>4</sup> In Tanakh, the word *revah* always means either “space” or “relief.”<sup>5</sup> So we must reject the “at my sighing” translation or anything akin to it.<sup>6</sup>

But translating *le-ravhati* as “relief” is also difficult. “Do not hide Your ear to my relief, to my cry” is a very strange phrase. The word “relief” does not fit well at all. We would expect that God’s ear might hide from a “cry” or “voice,” but not from “relief.” Moreover, “to my relief” is not a good parallel to “to my cry.”

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<sup>3</sup> In words derived from the root *revah*, there is no dot inside the *vav*. In words derived from the root *ruah*, there is a dot. Almost certainly, the “space” meaning of *revah* and these meanings of *ruah* have a related origin, but the exact nature of the relationship is still at issue. One suggestion is that the “space” meaning originally referred to the air between two things. See, e.g., Klein, 610.

<sup>4</sup> Even if the vocalization was *le-ruhati*, I am aware of no other time in Tanakh where *ruah* means “sigh” or something similar. Therefore, such an interpretation would be farfetched. Of course, Tanakh includes expressions such as *marat ruah* (bitterness) and *ruah nishbara* (broken spirit). But in expressions such as these there is another word that clarifies the state of the *ruah*.

Some propose emending the text and adding an initial yod to *le-shav’ati* so it becomes *li-yeshuati*.<sup>7</sup> *Yeshuah* means “salvation,” and is a better parallel to “relief.” Nevertheless, neither “relief” nor “salvation” fits well following, “Do not hide your ear.”

Another approach is to understand “my relief” as “my prayer for my relief,” which the *ArtScroll Tanach* (1996) proposes.<sup>8</sup> ArtScroll translates *le-shav’ati* (after a comma) as “to my cry.” But still it is difficult to justify adding in “my prayer for,” as it is not really in the text.

An alternative and in my view superior approach is the one adopted by Adele Berlin in her commentary on Lamentations.<sup>9</sup> She suggests that what we have here is an (atypical) hendiadys. ‘Hendiadys’ is a Latinized form of a Greek phrase that means “one through two,” and has been defined as “the expression of one single but complex concept by two separate words. ... The important aspect of hendiadys is that its

<sup>5</sup> The root *revah* occurs in Tanakh in Genesis 32:17, Exodus 8:11, 1 Samuel 16:23, Job 32:20, Jeremiah 22:14, and Esther 4:14.

<sup>6</sup> Another widespread similar translation that suffers from the same issues is: “to my groans.”

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., D. Hillers, *Lamentations* (The Anchor Bible) (1992), 118. Many precede him with this suggestion. The argument has been made that the Septuagint supports this reading.

<sup>8</sup> In 1986, the ArtScroll Rosh Hashanah Machzor translated differently: “my prayer for my relief when I cry out.”

<sup>9</sup> *Lamentations: A Commentary* (2002).

components are no longer considered separately but as a single unit in combination.”<sup>10</sup> An example is *yad va-shem* (Isaiah 56:5). If this is a hendiadys, which is likely, the two words together do not mean a *yad* (monument) and a *shem* (memorial) but a *yad* that will serve as a *shem*. Another example is *ger ve-toshav*. This should be understood as *ger toshav* (a *ger* – a foreigner, who is a *toshav* – a resident).

If our phrase is a hendiadys, then it is to be read as one concept and can mean “my plea for relief.” Berlin prefers this translation.<sup>11</sup> Even though there is no *vav* between the two words, making it atypical, Berlin and others are willing to interpret our phrase as if it were a hendiadys. Although the typical hendiadys has two nouns with a *vav* between them, it occurs with other forms of words as well.<sup>12</sup>

Hendiadyses are not just found in Hebrew, but in

other ancient Semitic languages like Ugaritic and Akkadian. It is also found in Greek, Latin, and English. For example, Macbeth in Shakespeare’s famous play says, “It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” “Sound and fury” is a hendiadys, offering a more striking image than “furious sound,” but meaning the same thing.

When involving two nouns, hendiadys results in extra emphasis, instead of a noun with a modifying adjective. This is one of hendiadys’ primary purposes, and what we see in the Shakespeare example. But a hendiadys has other functions as well, such as producing assonance or rhyme or preserving rhythm.<sup>13</sup>

Even if those last two words of Eikhah 3:56 are not a hendiadys,<sup>14</sup> it is a style used many times in Tanakh that needs to be better publicized. Some scholars believe that there are only a small

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<sup>10</sup> W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (1986, 2d ed.), 324–25.

<sup>11</sup> Berlin, 81 and 83. See also 4 where she writes that she adopts this approach “even though the conjunctive ‘and’ is lacking and so this may not be a true hendiadys.”

Berlin was not the first to cite hendiadys as an explanation for our two words, as Watson (p. 328) preceded her. Our phrase is cited as one of the many possible examples of hendiadyses in Tanakh in the dissertation cited below, at 583.

Without using the term hendiadys, Soncino, in its commentary, had offered the translation: “my cry for relief.” Daat Mikra also understands the phrase in this manner without mentioning hendiadyses or an equivalent term in Hebrew. R.B. Salters, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Lamentations* (2010), 267–269, points out several others who give such an interpretation without stating explicitly that they view the two words as a

hendiadys. (Salters himself disagrees and disputes our present text.)

The interpretation “my cry for relief” is also found in some of our traditional sources. See, e.g., Radak, *Sefer Ha-Shorashim*.

<sup>12</sup> There are other phrases in Tanakh without a *vav* between them that many argue are hendiadyses. For example, *koli tahanunai* (Psalms 116:1). This may mean “my supplicating voice.” Salters mentions some Biblical manuscripts which have a *vav* between our two words in Lamentations 3:56, but the *vav* was likely a later addition.

<sup>13</sup> Watson, 328.

<sup>14</sup> If one rejects the hendiadys approach in Lamentations, one can read the verse as a plea to God not to hide His ear from the pleader’s “relief” and “cry,” and just accept the fact that “ear” does not fit well with “relief.”

number of hendiadyses in Tanakh, but most believe there are many.<sup>15</sup> For example, already in Genesis 1:2 we have *tohu va-vohu*, which many believe to be a hendiadys meaning “formless void.”

When first proposed by Christian Hebraists in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, here are some of the hendiadyses that were suggested:<sup>16</sup>

- Genesis 19:24: *gafrit va-esh*, literally “sulfur and fire.” If a hendiadys, it is one concept that means either “burning sulfur” or “sulfurous fire.”
- Genesis 23:4: *ger ve-toshav*, literally “foreigner and resident.” As noted, this is to be understood as *ger toshav*, i.e., a *ger* who is a *toshav*.<sup>17</sup>
- Jeremiah 22:3: *mishpat u-tzedakah*, literally “judgment and righteousness.” Perhaps it means “righteous judgment.”
- Job 4:16: *demamah ve-kol*, literally “silence and voice.” If a hendiadys, it means “low voice.”<sup>18</sup>

Limiting ourselves to the first half of the book of Genesis, here are some others that have been suggested in recent centuries:

- Genesis 1:14: *le-otot u-le-moadim* - as signs to mark seasons
- Genesis 1:22: *peru u-revu* - be abundantly fruitful
- Genesis 2:15: *le-avdah u-leshamrah* - for the task of tending it
- Genesis 3:16: *itzvoneikh ve-heironeikh* - your pain in childbearing
- Genesis 4:12: *na ve-nad* - restless wanderer
- Genesis 11:4: *ir u-migdal* - towering city
- Genesis 12:1: *mei-artzekha u-mimoladetekha* - from your native land
- Genesis 13:13: *raim ve-hataim* - wicked sinners
- Genesis 22:2: *et binkha et yihidekha* - your only son

The following occur several times in Tanakh: *hesed ve-emet*, *toshav ve-sakhir*, and *yayin ve-shekhar* (“wine that makes one inebriated”).

*Hesed ve-emet*, appears many times, significantly in Exodus 34:6 in the first of the two verses where the thirteen Divine attributes are specified. The complete phrase here is *ve-rav hesed ve-emet*. Almost all commentators count *hesed* and *emet* as separate attributes. But if *hesed ve-emet* is a hendiadys here, these words amount to only one

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<sup>15</sup> Rosmari Lillas, *Hendiadys in the Hebrew Bible* (Univ. of Gothenburg, 2012), is a dissertation available online that discusses hendiadys extensively and itemizes many possible hendiadyses throughout Tanakh.

<sup>16</sup> I am not claiming that Rishonim and early Aharonim did not interpret the individual verses below in a manner that

achieves the same result. But I do not think they discussed something like hendiadys as a general principle.

<sup>17</sup> There are a few other verses with *ger ve-toshav*. Interestingly, in Leviticus 25:47, we have *ger ve-toshav* and *ger toshav* in the same verse.

<sup>18</sup> The related *kol demamah* appears in 1 Kings 19:12.

attribute, and this is one of the ways Daat Mikra understands the phrase.<sup>19</sup>

To conclude, it is ironic that a style often meant for emphasis is little known today, resulting in various biblical passages being misunderstood. This might be what happened to *le-ravhati le-shav'ati*. Thus, it is important to look out for hendiadys when reading Biblical passages.<sup>20</sup>

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*Ed. Note: The following article was originally published in 2020. We are rerunning it in conjunction with Parshat Ki Tavo.*

## PARSHAT KI TAVO: THE CURSE OF THE LAW

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**T**he late seventies: I was not yet twenty, commuting to college between my home in New Jersey and New York City. Trudging each day through the Port Authority bus station, I would regularly be approached by missionaries of varying beliefs, my *kippah* apparently marking me a worthy target. Politely, I would assure them that

I was not interested, but one day curiosity took control and I stopped to engage a young man (a Jew for Jesus) in conversation. After all, I had just returned from a year at Gush where we had a weekly class in “*Da Mah Le-hashiv*,” responses to missionary arguments, and I, perhaps a bit brashly, felt that I had amassed the knowledge and experience to counter any argument.

And indeed, the conversation went fairly well from my standpoint. The verses from *Tanakh* that my new friend brought as proof of prophecies fulfilled by Jesus were generally mistranslations, and he did not impress me as a particularly deep thinker. “I see you are more knowledgeable than I am,” he finally said, “but I really would like you to meet my teacher.” Years of yeshiva indoctrination had my imagination spinning with thoughts of cults and kidnapping, but I nonetheless accepted the invitation (with the stipulation that we meet in a very public place). Timothy and I met for coffee at a Howard Johnson’s in Times Square for what turned out to be a fascinating discussion which lasted for four hours. Mainly, I listened. As before, the Biblical verses which he interpreted as indications or predictions made no impression on me, as I could read them in the original Hebrew and place them in their actual context.

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<sup>19</sup> See similarly Daat Mikra to Genesis 24:27 and the comments in the Conservative movement’s *Etz Hayim Torah commentary* (Exodus 34:6): “The Hebrew words *hesed v’emet* appear frequently together to express a single concept .... When used together, the two words express God’s absolute and eternal dependability in dispensing His benefactions.”

<sup>20</sup> For further reading, see E.Z. Melamed, *Shenayim She-Hem Ehad* (EN ΔΙΑ ΔΥΟΙΝ) *Ba-Mikra*, Tarbitz 16 (1945),

173–189; R. Gordis, *The Word and the Book* (1976), 40–43; W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (1986, second ed.), 324–328. I would like to thank Rabbi Menahem Meier for introducing me to the concept of hendiadys after he read an article I had written about the meaning of the Biblical phrase *yad va-shem* when I was unaware of the concept. I would like to thank my wife Sharon for getting me interested in the root *resh-vav-het*. I would like to thank Sam Borodach and Mike Alweis for their feedback as I was writing this article.

The miracles that did or did not happen I likewise dismissed, referencing [Deuteronomy 13:3-4](#), “If the sign or portent comes true... do not heed the words of that prophet,” which explicitly disqualifies miracles as a basis for rejecting established Torah precepts.

Though many topics were touched on and the fundamental differences between our faiths explored, there was one particular argument of his that intrigued me. “Salvation through the law is a notion that is inherently flawed,” Timothy contended. “We all agree that no one is without sin, and the Bible clearly states that one who sins is cursed. Therefore, everyone working within that theological system, that is to say, Judaism, is inevitably cursed.” The way to salvation, he continued, is not through commitment to the law, but rather via faith in the one who nullified the curse through his suffering. Leaving aside the difficulties with the alternative proposed by Timothy (its logical inconsistencies, its shirking of personal responsibility, and other problematical moral, religious, and historical consequences), the argument itself interested me. I left the meeting unscathed theologically, but with a deep desire to learn more and research the topic more fully.

Timothy was referring to a doctrine first articulated by Paul known as The Curse of the Law. In a sermon to the Galatians (a pagan community in the Anatolian region of Turkey), Paul says, “For all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not observe and obey all the things written in the book of the law’ ” (Galatians 3:10). Paul is quoting a verse in this week’s Torah portion, *Parshat Ki Tavo*, relating to the ceremony

of blessings and curses to be recited on Mounts Gerizim and Eval when the Israelites entered the Land of Israel. The last of the twelve curses is a general catch-all coming after a list of very specific transgressions:

Cursed be he who will not uphold the terms of this Teaching and observe them. —And all the people shall say, Amen. [\(Deuteronomy 27:26\)](#)

The second part of Timothy’s argument, that no one is without sin, also finds expression in the Bible. The author of Ecclesiastes points out what we all know to be true, “For there is not one good man on Earth who does what is best and doesn’t sin” ([Ecclesiastes 7:20](#)). It would appear, then, that sooner or later, the curse in Deuteronomy would be leveled against every single Jew. Rashi does not deny that this is the case. [His explanation](#) of the verse is straightforward: “Here (in these words) he included the entire Torah [under a curse], and they took it upon themselves with a curse and an oath.” Other commentators, such as [Ibn Ezra](#), are bothered by this possibility. Thus, they mitigate the scope of the curse somewhat, claiming that it applies only to one who transgresses the specific sins mentioned previously in the curses, who sins in private, or similar limitations.

While these commentators address the troubling conclusion that results from the juxtaposition of these verses, they do not address the Pauline doctrine directly. To find a classical commentator who does directly and clearly respond to this

doctrine, we must turn to Ramban (Nahmanides). Among classical Jewish commentators, no one understood Medieval Christian theology and the challenges posed by its proponents to Jews better than he; after all, he himself defended the Jewish position in the famous [Disputation of Barcelona in late July 1263](#). There, in front of King James of Aragon, the apostate Sephardic Jew known as Pablo Christiani attempted to prove the truth of Christianity in a public debate with Ramban, hoping to convert other Spanish Jews and even Ramban himself. In the short-term, the King was deeply impressed by Ramban's arguments saying memorably, that he had never heard an "unjust cause so nobly defended." He even paid a public visit to the Jewish synagogue that Friday night as a mark of his respect. Ramban, however, had had deep reservations about participating in the debate to begin with, sensing that no good would come of it, and indeed, that turned out to be the case. Though granted complete freedom to speak without fear of retaliation, he was ultimately forced to flee Spain and in 1267 settled in Israel in the Old City of Jerusalem.

Ramban [in his commentary on Deuteronomy 27:26](#) first quotes Rashi, then gives his own innovative explanation:

In my opinion, this commitment is that one acknowledges the validity of the commandments in his heart and that they are truthful in his view. That he believe that one who fulfills them will benefit and be rewarded, and that

he who transgresses them will be punished. And if a person rejects any one of them or deems it permanently annulled, he is under this curse. But if someone transgresses a specific commandment, for example he ate pork or unkosher food out of desire [weakness] or did not fulfill the commandment of sukkah or lulav due to laziness, he is not under this curse.

The verse, Ramban claims, is not talking about the typical sinner who falls short of perfect adherence to the law for any one of a number of reasons such as lack of self-restraint or laziness. Such a person has no doubt transgressed the law and is expected to repent. However, so long as one believes by and large in the overall system, and admits that observing the commandments is the proper thing to do, the curse does not apply to him, even if at times he falters.

Ramban grounds his interpretation in a careful reading of the text:

For the text does not say "he who does not **perform** (*ya'aseh*) these words of Torah" but rather it says "he who does not **uphold** (*yakim*) these words of Torah to perform them," along the lines of "The

Jews undertook (*kiymu*) and irrevocably obligated themselves.” And this is a curse directed at the rebels and infidels.

Ramban supports his remarkable explanation by referencing the famous verse from the Book of Esther (9:27), (another Jewish hero who defended her people before a foreign king) which describes the Jewish people’s spontaneous affirmation of their obligation to the Torah using the same term (*k-y-m*) as the verse in Deuteronomy. Based on this language, he deflects Paul’s challenge by asserting that a run-of-the-mill sinner is not the object of this curse so long as he accepts the Torah upon himself and feels obligated by it. Indeed, no man on Earth can live up to a level of perfection entirely free from sin, misjudgment, lapse of moral or religious fortitude or downright weakness, or negligence. Those types of faults, however, make one human, not cursed. With Ramban’s (re-)interpretation, Paul’s entire premise crumbles and his assertion that salvation under the law is impossible is rendered invalid.

But with deftness worthy of a master swordsman, Ramban not only parries Paul’s attack, but pivots to rebound the verse – and the curse – back against the Pauline challenger. The curse is not leveled against a normal sinner, but rather it applies to one who rejects the eternal validity of the system, to one who claims that observing the law is no longer capable of “benefiting and rewarding,” i.e. of effecting salvation. Ramban was certainly familiar with Paul’s message to the Galatians and the polemical use of this verse, and

it would certainly seem that his term “rebels and infidels” is referring to Christians, or more specifically to Jewish apostates who converted to Christianity. As in the story of Bilaam who came to curse Israel but ended up blessing them, Ramban takes Paul’s doctrine which aimed to curse the Jews and bless their detractors, and transforms that very doctrine into the precise object and focus of that same curse. The curse is not directed at those who try (but sometimes fail) to uphold the Law (namely, the Jews), but rather at those who deny the eternal validity of the Law (i.e., apostates such as Paul and Pablo Christiani).

Ramban ends this piece with a somewhat unusual Aggadic note. The Midrash gives an alternate explanation to the phrase “who does not uphold” in our verse, claiming that these words are directed to the *magbihak*, the one who literally holds up (*mekim*) the Torah scroll for the congregation to see at the reading of the Torah portion. They exhort him to fulfill his duty with the utmost attention: special care must be taken as he “...lifts it up and shows the text to the right and left, to the front and back, since it is a *Mitzvah* for all the men, women, and children to see the text and to bow and say *ve-zot ha-Torah*, ‘and this is the Torah which Moshe placed before the Children of Israel.’ ”

In light of his interpretation of the verse and its context as part of the Christian polemic it engendered, one wonders if the *hagbah* tradition took on a deep and poignant significance to the Jews in Medieval Christian Europe. To those outside the synagogue who claimed that the law of Moshe was no longer valid, the devout pointed

directly at the ancient text of the Torah scroll, exclaiming and passionately affirming “*ve-zot ha-Torah*” – **this** is the Torah, unchanging and binding. That phrase resonates with the words of the ninth of Maimonides’ thirteen principles of faith:

I believe with perfect faith that this Torah (*zot ha-Torah*) is immutable and there shall never be another Torah given by God.

Ramban urges his fellow Jews to cherish the Torah scroll and appreciate every single word it contains. And there is good reason to cherish it. Rather than leading to inevitable despair, adherence to the Law is the eternal path towards physical and spiritual well being, as proclaimed again and again in this week’s Torah portion:

Now, if you obey the Lord your God, to observe faithfully all His commandments which I enjoin upon you this day... All these blessings shall come upon you and take effect... ([Deuteronomy 28:1-2](#))

By explicitly rejecting Paul’s Curse of the Law, Ramban, echoing the words of the prophet, has in effect, “turned the curse into a blessing” ([Nehemiah 13:2](#)), as he reminds us not to despair of our all too human shortcomings, and to

embrace the truth of the Torah and its eternal relevance.

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