

The words that I sang after the Amidah are excerpted from the blessings at the beginning of this week's parashah, Bechukotai. If we walk in God's path, and follow the mitzvot, the portion opens with a promise of blessing: that we will dwell safely in our land, and we will lie down at night with nothing to fear. We will harvest what we sow in such abundance that there will still be plenty of old grain even as we bring in the new grain.

Those words, that promise, seemed both simultaneously so fantastical and so soothing that I conceived of them as lullaby, a story sung for children, and on Tuesday, walking in the woods, I composed the setting that you heard.

And on Tuesday evening, I saw the news about another shooting. I wishing I were saying, "the tragic and inconceivable shooting in Uvalde, Texas," but as I saw the story pop up on my phone, my first thought was, in fact, "Oh, another shooting. Of course. This is what happens."

Some of you saw my message on Wednesday to the congregation: this is not how I'd like to feel. I'd like to feel shocked or outraged. But mostly, I feel terror: my daughter will begin public school in a few short months, and I will join the ranks of parents who know that we might get the call that our children have been shot at school.

Of course, school is not the only site of risk. Those of us gathered in the synagogue take a risk by being here. Life is full of risks. And yet, I have to remind myself that it didn't have to be this way, and doesn't have to remain this way. Among the conceivable fears in a parent's mind does not have to be the fear that we or our children will be shot by a high capacity firearm in school, at worship or at play. As my mentor, Rabbi Sharon Kleinbaum, wrote earlier this week, "At least 196 countries in this world of ours, and our country is the only one in the world where this happens with such frequency that sometimes it fails to even be the top story on the news. Yet there is nothing we, as Americans, can do about it? No other developed country in the world has this wide-scale problem. . . . We are the only one."

Clearly, the most dangerous response is the response I first felt: "Of course. This is the way things are."

Blessings change very quickly to curse, in our own experience sometimes, and in this week's parasha. Only a few verses of blessing, and then we hear about the curses if we do not follow the path of truth: Disease, hunger, war. One verse struck me hard, verse 17, after describing tangible hardships: "You shall flee though none pursues." Imagine a society so fearful that we are always on the verge of flight. It isn't hard to imagine, is it?

But the curses do not just come, they multiply. At various verses, we are warned that if we do not repent, if we continue on our disastrous path, the curses will multiply sevenfold.

Rabbi Gila Colman Ruskin, in her dvar Torah for T'ruah: the Rabbinic Call for Human Rights, pointed out this week that one word shows up seven times in this Torah portion, in the multiplication of the curses, and in *nowhere else in Torah*. That word is *keri*: *kuf-resh-yud*. It is used to describe a behavior we might do in response to curses that will exacerbate the curses, and also to describe God's behavior in cursing us, as in verses 23 and 24 which read, "And if these things fail to discipline you for Me, and you remain *keri* to Me, I too will be *in kerii* with you: I in turn will smite you sevenfold for your sins."

It is not clear exactly what this word means, but as Rabbi Ruskin points out, "When a particular word occurs only seven times in the entire Bible, and all seven occurrences are in one chapter, we pay attention. Something important is being communicated."

So what is it?

Based on context, many commentators reasonably translate *keri* as "hostility" or "contrariness." Others understand the word to be related to the root ק-ר-ה – the verb "to happen" or "mikrah," occurrence. Rashi suggests that acting *kerii with* God means that we do *mitzvot* – sometimes. When we *happen* to get around to them.

But I find the way that Chizkuni translates the word more compelling, He translates, "you go *keri* with me" as "but if you will walk with Me as if what happens to you is only coincidental."

The commentator Or HChaim expands: “Inasmuch as the afflictions which have been visited upon the Jewish people are clearly the hand of G'd, their failure to react is described as walking contrary to G'd. Even though the Israelites had not become guilty of additional sins the fact that they had not become penitent is accounted as if the sins had been committed anew.”

By this reading, the worst thing we can do is not to fail in the first place. The worst thing we can do is to ignore our own failure, and then to refuse to recognize the consequences of failure: to react to catastrophe as coincidence, instead of being willing to acknowledge the unfolding of our own disastrous choices. The worst thing we can do is fail to do *teshuvah*, because we refuse to acknowledge that we've made poor choices.

Of course, there are limits to this theology, and I would never suggest that a person seek to blame themselves for illness or tragedy. But the blessings and curses of Bechukotai are in the plural; they speak to the large-scale, collective successes or failures of a society, and the consequences of acknowledging or failing to acknowledge the choices they bring the curses on.

If we treat extreme weather patterns as fluke, rather than as evidence of human-caused climate change, we are, according to Chizkuni and Or HaChaim's reading, “going *b'keri*.”

If we treat a pandemic that has claimed over a million lives as a random tragedy, rather than acknowledging the failure of a country that refuses to provide decent healthcare and sick leave, then we are going “*b'keri*.”

And if we respond to gun violence in our schools and holy places as something is either random or inevitable, then we are going “*b'keri*,”

Our parashah reminds us that to resign ourselves to the curses as “just the way life is,” or “just the way the world is” or “just the way our country is” is to invite the curses to multiply.

I do not know how we address the pandemic of gun violence in this country, and its intertwined thread of white supremacist terror. I am sure you have all received plenty of email about the petitions to sign and the organizations to donate to. But I do know that the first step is to say, to ourselves and the world:

This is *not* normal.

This is *not* inevitable.

This is the result of choices that we can and must make differently.

Some day, I hope we can get to a place where we can sing “vayishavtem lavetach b’artzeheim” and experience it as true – or even possible. Until then, let us remember that living in peace is the aspiration, and that we should never resign ourselves to living in fear.