



DEVARIM

Reeh / 1st Day Rosh Chodesh Elul

Is Life Blessed or Cursed?

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IS LIFE BLESSED OR CURSED?

A NEW WAY OF LOOKING AT YOURSELF

ABSTRACT

Is life more blessing or curse? When you add up all the good things in life and all the negative ones, which list is longer?

No surprise then that the consensus in the Talmud agrees with the school of Shammai that “it would have been more pleasant for man to not have been created.”

But then why would a good G-d create a life that is so unpleasant and challenged?

We can find the answer in the strange opening of this week’s Torah reading: “See that I am endowing you today with both a blessing and a curse.” The expression used here “endowing” is disturbing: What type of endowment (which also means gift) is a curse?! As if G-d is saying here “See that I am gifting you with both a blessing and a curse!” Surely a blessing is a gift, but a curse?!

Same with life: We call it the gift of life. If it is indeed more pleasant not to be created, what sort of “gift” is life?!

A few powerful lines from Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi on this week’s Parsha will allow us to appreciate this gift of life – the blessing and the curse that we are endowed with – which is the greatest gift of all.

One single word, “pleasant,” that Shammai uses, is the key, explains Rabbi Schneur Zalman, to this mystery. And with that he teaches us one of the most important lessons we will ever hear: It’s far more important that life be meaningful than pleasant. It’s a far greater blessing to have an empowered life than an easy one.

1. Death and Taxes (Humor)

This week’s Torah reading opens by telling us that G-d has given us both blessings and curses. Which in itself is very disturbing: Why would G-d want to give us curses?

But before we get to that, allow me to begin by wishing all of you and all people only revealed blessings in your lives. And even the setbacks that we may encounter should be with minimal pain.

On a lighter note, for many of us “curses” are thankfully nothing more than the nuisances of life. You know the one that goes like this:

What is the closest synonym for “curses”? You guessed it – “taxes.” Or more accurately “death and taxes.”

And what’s the difference between death and taxes?

Death doesn’t get worse each time Congress meets.

2. Good and Bad News (Humor)

Sometimes “blessings” and “curses” are very relative, and often they can be confused with one another, as in a “blessing in disguise.” What one person may consider a curse another may find to be a blessing.

Consider these examples:

A story is told of a Jewish man who was riding on the subway reading an anti-Semitic newspaper. A friend of his, who happened to be riding in the same subway car, noticed this strange phenomenon. Very upset, he approached the newspaper reader:

“Moshe, have you lost your mind? Why are you reading an anti-Semitic newspaper?”

Moshe replied: “I used to read the Jewish newspaper, but what did I find? Jews are being persecuted, Israel is being attacked, Jews are disappearing through assimilation and inter-marriage, Jews are living in poverty. So I switched to the anti-Jewish newspaper. Now what do I find? Jews own all the banks, Jews control the media, Jews are all rich and powerful, Jews rule the world. The news is so much better! It’s a pleasure to read all this!”

Or this:

After taking a spin in their new car, a woman phoned her husband at work.

Her husband said, “I’m sorry dear, but I’m up to my neck in work today.”

The wife responded, “But I’ve got some good news and some bad news for you, dear.”

The husband then replied, “Okay, darling, but as I’ve got very little time now, just give me the good news.”

“Well,” said the wife, “the air bag works.”

And yet another:

A civil servant is badly hurt working night shift in a coal mine. He is taken to the hospital where he remains in a coma for several days.

Finally, an eye opens and his doctor tells him: “My friend, I have for you some bad news and some good news. First of all, you’ll never be able to work again...”

“Nu,” muttered the injured bureaucrat. “And what’s the bad news?”

But on a more serious note, sadly “curses” for some manifest in very tragic ways. And that brings us to this week’s Torah reading which seems that the Torah is speaking about so many of our lives, which are comprised of a complex mix of “blessings” and “curses,” positive and negative experiences.

Wherever you look – both on a personal level and a global scale – our world is a muddled snowball of good and bad.

3. Life: Blessing or Curse?

So is life more blessing or curse? When you add up all the good things in life and all the negative ones, which list is longer?

This very question is addressed in the Talmud:

The Rabbis taught: For two and a half years, the house of Hillel and the house of Shammai argued. One said that it was pleasant for man to be created, and the other said that it would have been more pleasant for man to not have been created. They voted and determined that it would have been more pleasant not to have been created, but now that he had been created, he should investigate his deeds.¹

Since the consensus in the Talmud agrees with Shammai that “it would have been more pleasant for man to not have been created,” why then would a good G-d create a life that is so unpleasant and challenged?!

¹ *Erubin* 13b.

4. The “Gift” of Blessing and Curse?

To answer this let us read the opening of this this week’s Torah portion: *Re’eh Anochi nosen lifneychem hayom berachah ukalah*. “See that I am endowing you today with both a blessing and a curse.”

Upon reading these words closely the verse seems quite strange. The expression used here, “endowing,” is disturbing: What type of endowment (which also means gift²) is a curse?! As if G-d is saying here “See that I am gifting you with both a blessing and a curse!” Surely a blessing is a gift, but a curse?!

It makes you think of the back-handed Yiddish blessings like: “May you be very rich ... and the only one in your family with money.”

Clearly there is some deeper meaning in this verse which will allow us to understand how the “curse” is part of the gift endowed upon us. But how can we explain that?

This is similar to the question asked above: Since all agree that “it would have been more pleasant for man to not have been created,” why would a good G-d create a life that is so unpleasant and challenged?!

5. More Pleasant, Not More Meaningful

In a few powerful few lines in his Likkutei Torah on this week’s Parsha³, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi explains this seemingly despondent Talmud:

Rabbi Schneur Zalman (also known as the Alter Rebbe) explains that the key to the mystery lies in the single word, “pleasant” (*nuach*), used by the school of Shammai. They didn’t say that it is “good” or “better” not to be created (G-d forbid⁴), because the entire purpose of life is to come down to earth and face the challenges of life – both the positive and negative experiences (blessings and curses) – and transform the material world into a divine home.

It is certainly more *pleasant* for a soul to remain in the spiritual realms and not have to struggle with pain and suffering, trials and tribulations of material life on earth. Thus, “it would have been more pleasant for man to not have been created.” “More pleasant,” but not more meaningful or better. For only life in a world of blessings and curses offers us the ability to live

² *Nosen* from the word *mattana*.

³ *Likkutei Torah Re’eh* 29a.

⁴ This actual term, *chas v’sholom*, is used by the Alter Rebbe.

purposefully, deliberately, transformationally.

With this short explanation, the Alter Rebbe teaches us one of the most important lessons we will ever hear: It's far more important that life be meaningful than pleasant. It's a far greater blessing to have an empowered life than an easy one.

6. The Greatest Gift

This also explains the opening verse of our Parsha: The gift G-d is endowing us is not the “blessing” and “curse” per se, but the fact that we are placed in a world where there is both blessing and curse, which is definitely unpleasant, but filled with meaning and purpose – allowing us the ability to choose and transform our lives and the world around us.

The greatest gift of all, explains the Alter Rebbe, is a life of purpose. And this is possible only in life on earth, where we have two paths, one of blessing and one of curse.

Another way of putting it: The gift we are endowed with – *Re'eh Anochi nosen lifneychem* (“see that I am endowing you”) – is not just a life where we have both paths of blessing and curse, but the power to discern both these paths.

The gift is the *clarity* to know that we always have two paths before us, and the *clarity* to know which one to choose and which one *not* to choose.

Imagine you were lost in the woods and you stop someone for directions. He can either tell you which path to travel on, or which path to avoid. Which would you prefer? Which is more important? Rephrased: Instead of telling you what path to follow, he tells you what path not to follow. Is that not as valuable? To know what path to avoid is as, if not a greater blessing than knowing what path to take.

Just think of how many mistaken roads (and lost years) we could have avoided in our lives had someone only warned us not to travel down those pathways.

Now, we are told in the opening verse of today's Torah portion that G-d is endowing us with both pieces of information – *Re'eh Anochi nosen lifneychem hayom berachah ukalah*, “with both a blessing and a curse” – with the clarity of both knowing what path to take and what path to avoid.

7. The Gift of Clarity

Clarity is the greatest gift of all. “There is no joy,” our sages tell us, “as resolving doubts.”⁵

Why is that the case?

In an imperfect world like ours, it is not realistic to expect that we will only have perfect moments. Life is filled with challenges. Difficult moments come our way as much as, if not more than, beautiful experiences. The real challenge in life is not to avoid or ignore the harder times, but to know what to do with them.

What is a greater gift: to have a perfect life or an empowered life? A life in which we have no challenges or difficulties, or one which poses challenges, but at the same time we are given the strengths to conquer any adversary?

We are thus endowed by G-d with this gift of clarity – to know how to deal with any given situation, whether it be a “blessed” one or a “cursed” one. When we come to a point of choice, a fork in the road, to know which path *not* to take is as great a gift as to know which path *to* take.

Otherwise, we have Yogi Berra’s advice: “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

We are endowed with this gift of clarity, today more than ever. As we have been promised that at the end of days we will be blessed with clarity, in the words of G-d to the Prophet Daniel: “For these matters are obscured and sealed until the time of the end. Then they will be elucidated and clarified....”⁶

8. Uncertain Times

Uncertain times bring out the best and the worst in people, both the blessing and the curse. Remarkable acts of philanthropy on the beautiful side; looting and pillaging on the ugly side.

Why is it that disorder – the breakdown of conventional structures – causes some of us to rise to the occasion and others to sink? Is it due to nature, poverty, education, lack thereof or

⁵ Metzudat Dovid to Proverbs 15:30.

⁶ Daniel 12:9-10.

some other factor?

It seems that when law and order break down, some people's minds and morals experience a meltdown.

How do you think you would behave with no police around and everyone else was taking the law into their hands? Would you stay true to your principles or be willing to bend them? Would you choose the path of "blessing" or that of "curse"?

These and many other questions come to mind as we look at the wobbling state of our society. At such a time, says Maimonides, we should be asking such questions. We should be examining our lives and correcting our ways.⁷

And the biggest question of all is: Why does G-d gift us with both a blessing and a curse in the first place?

Because in combination of blessing and curse lies the gift of *clarity*.

Only in this material world, where the divine is concealed, do we have two options – the blessing and the curse – and the power to choose.

So while it's more *pleasant* not to be created, it's not better or meaningful to not be created. In the contrary, only on earth below where we have both paths before us and we choose the right path and not the wrong one, can we reach the greatest heights.

There is no greater gift than this.

9. Why Curses?

Why life has "curses" – whether they are "natural" disasters or man-made ones – is the great question of the ages. And after all the answers have been considered, sacred silence is the ultimate answer.

For the suffering person, no explanation in this universe or beyond will ever suffice. A rational mind cannot speak to a bleeding heart. Academic discussions do not touch the crying soul. We are simply too limited.

⁷ See Laws of Fasting 1:2-3

This applies of course also to the latest tragedies: We simply do not have answers or words....

However, what is equally true is that we have been endowed with a gift – all the necessary resources and faculties to face any challenge that comes our way, both the path of “blessing” and the path of “curse.” We may not know why tragedy strikes or why our world’s infrastructures are about to break apart, but we can know what to do about it.

10. Grand Design

There’s much to say. But also very little to say. We are taught that we are all creatures of one G-d and all part of one grand design. The travails of one person are the travails of the entire human race.

We console each other by expressing our feelings, validating our questions and sharing our experiences. The human experience (whether it be in pain or in joy) is sacred, and our natural reaction (whether it be outrage or resolution) is divine.

Human dignity, the most divine of features has been greatly compromised in our times. And one of the greatest achievements is to lift people’s spirits and celebrate human dignity.

Amidst attacks on innocent people, amidst rioting and looting, the saddest sight to witness is people stooping to bestial behavior, betraying their own dignity and that of others. And the most empowering experience is seeing human dignity honored.

Your life on earth is the greatest of all gifts and blessings endowed to you by G-d: The power to live a purposeful life. The power of clarity – of both the path of blessing and the path of curse, and the wisdom to choose.

Yes, we always have two paths before us: Blessing and curse. Knowing that is a great gift. How we will choose is up to us. Amen.

11. The Torah Solution

You aren’t in the mood to play with your child? You just want to slump on the couch with that beer? The Torah solution is start playing, and you will get in the mood, because engaging in the physical

motions of commitment jump-starts genuine emotions.

That's the bottom line. If you can't get to all the shutters, get the shutters to you. Fake it till you make it. Best is if you can be calm enough to breathe. If not, at least breathe enough to make yourself calm. If you want the wheels to move, turn on the engine. If the engine doesn't start, get the wheels moving. If you don't believe enough to do, do enough to believe. If you aren't committed enough to be responsible, be responsible enough to become committed!

If you aren't happy enough to dance, dance enough to be happy.

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