

Parashat Re'eh

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Shabbat shalom!

Today's torah portion, Re'eh, begins with a simple proposition from God: "See here, I give you today a blessing and a curse." Some details of each are then enumerated, and then God urges us to choose the blessing. Well, actually, He does that indirectly. He says, "choose life," which we would all agree corresponds to choosing the blessing, considering what the opposite of life is.

So I have a question for all of you here this beautiful summer morning. Given the choice between a blessing and a curse, can I get a show of hands? How many would choose the blessing? And how many the curse?

Okay then, thank you very much. Shabbat shalom! (*start to leave bimah*)

No, really, you don't think you can get rid of me that quickly, do you?

I'm going to shift gears away from today's parashah a little now—I'll come back to it at the very end—and I'm going to ask you to consider a more subtle choice: which, if you had to choose, would you prefer, a blessing or a gift?

Now, there are a whole lot of "that depends" in what I suspect would be your answers. I suspect that many would say, "well, every blessing is in itself a gift of sorts, but certainly not every gift is a blessing." A gift could be a another tie or sweater you'll never wear, or on the other hand it could be a life-saving kidney. And does a blessing have any intrinsic value? Every time you sneeze, someone is likely to say "God bless you," but what is the value of that?

Now before we all come to a pleasant general consensus that a blessing is preferable to a gift, I would ask you to consider this scenario. Anyone here a Grandma, Bubbie, Nana, Savta, whatever? Okay, you go to visit your toddler grandchild for the first time in a while, and they run up to you excitedly. "Grandma, did you bring me a present?" And you answer, "No, Sweetie, but I brought you something better, I brought you a blessing!" How do you think that will go over?



We as Jews tend not to bless each other very much. The exception is that we do bless our children on Friday night. On the other hand, we bless God almost constantly, in all of our prayers, from the moment we wake up until we go to bed every night, whenever any type of food crosses our lips, when we experience new things in our lives, even when we go to the bathroom. A pious Jew may say a hundred *berachot* every day!

But we don't bless each other very much. "Have a nice day!" or even "Have a great day!", but when was the last time you said to a friend "Have a blessed day"? Our evangelical Christian neighbors tend to do that a lot. On vacation recently, a man I had never met saw me struggling a bit to get out of a rocky snorkeling area and rushed to help pull me up, and after assuring himself that I no longer needed his assistance said, "God bless you now." I didn't ask, but my Jew-dar told me he was *not* a member of our tribe.

But let's get back to my question: gift or blessing. Why do I ask this? Well, there's a very important verse in our liturgy that makes this distinction, and I want to go back to that now. There's a verse in the Tanach, and in the siddur, that says that God will both give us a gift and bless us. Anyone know what that verse might be?

Okay, please, if you will, open your siddurim to page 183, where we return the Torah to the ark, Psalm 29, *Mizmor l'David*, which we just sang only a few minutes ago. What is that psalm all about? Well, it's about God's might. "Ascribe to God his great might and glory." God's voice alone can overwhelm nature, flatten forests and the like. And almost the whole psalm is devoted to this theme, but in the end it briefly reverts back to us: "and in His sanctuary, all acknowledge His glory." And to sum it up, "Hashem has ruled even since the great Flood, and Hashem will rule forever."

Great psalm, powerful psalm, wonderful poetry! End of psalm. Right? Well, that should be the end. But the psalmist adds a peculiar coda: *Hashem oz l'amo yiten, hashem y'varech et amo vashalom*. Hashem will give strength to His people; Hashem will bless his people with peace.

What in the world is that verse doing there? Why is it appended to a psalm about God's literal supernatural might?

I would suggest that even the reason that this psalm is included at the end of the Torah service is because it contains this one line. So, what's it for?

Obviously, our Rabbis consider this to be a very important verse, because it is repeated in our liturgy elsewhere. Where else? Anyone?

Well, when we opened the ark, back on page 168, it's right there on the fifth line. And notice what's on the line just above it: *Hashem melech, Hashem malach,*

Hashem yimloch l'olam va-ed. Just like in the psalm, the preceding line is about God's eternal reign.

Okay, where else? Well, after every meal we eat, we say *birkat hamazon*, and how does that conclude? With the very same verse.

One more place: At the end of the Shabbat service, there's a reading from the Talmud right between the Ayn Kaylohaynu and the Aleinu, the *Amar Rabbi Eliezer*. It's a collection of verses, almost all about peace, how to achieve it through teaching our children and promoting fellowship, and it also concludes with our verse.

So the verse is clearly important. But why? And underneath all of this, why is it that strength (*oz*) is considered a gift, while peace (*shalom*) is a blessing?

What is *oz*, anyway? It's translated a strength, but what kind of strength? The ability to lift a heavy object is not *oz*, it's either *koach* or *hazakah*. *Oz* is more the ability to endure, to withstand forces or circumstances that would otherwise overwhelm you. In Psalm 118, which we recite in the Hallel service, we say *oz v'zimrat yah*, God is my strength who keeps me upright even though I am pushed to fall. So in the context of Psalm 29, when it says that God will give us, His people, strength, the strength here is the ability to withstand the awesome power which overwhelms all of Nature's forces. Do not be afraid of what God's voice alone can do, we can handle it. That is His unconditional gift to us, and what a gift it is! That *oz* has kept us as a people going and growing for over two thousand years, in spite of tremendous adversity.

And in the final paragraph of *birkat hamazon*, we are presented with a series of assertions that are truly difficult for us to say: "God opens His hand, satisfying all living things." "Never in my long life have I seen a seen a righteous person or their family go hungry and abandoned." How can we pray such things that from a practical standpoint are demonstrably untrue? Well, the final verse gives us the answer: God will give us strength, *oz*, to help us reject the despair that would overtake us when we have to recite those verses, and convert them instead from assertion to aspiration, a hope that in the future these might be true.

Okay, that's the gift. What about the blessing? Shalom, peace. Well, peace can't be a gift. No one can just give you peace, it's not something that can simply be bestowed. Peace is like a radioactive isotope, it's intrinsically unstable, it decays into conflict. Think of all of the superheroes in the Marvel universe, they have all been given marvelous gifts: strength, speed, the ability to fly, to spin webs from their hands, to see through solid objects, to blow fire or to withstand fire. Yet none of them can achieve peace. That's why their missions are never-ending, because villains are always re-emerging. They win every battle they fight, but they never

can achieve peace. Which is good for Disney, I suppose, because there's always a sequel where another bad guy comes. Wouldn't it be really nice if there were a superhero called Peaceman? Wow! But I don't think that franchise would do very well. Peace is something that we must all work for, both individually and with others, to establish it—within our own souls, our communities, and the world at large. Achieving it, if we can, with God's grace and help, is truly a blessing.

A final thought on this verse. As I have gotten older, a maxim I hear over and over is this: "Every day is a gift." We are reminded that our lives are fragile and ephemeral, not to be taken for granted. But while it is true that every new day is a gift, to circle back to the opening verse of today's parshah, then it is our responsibility to choose life, to cut through all of the curses, and to make every day into a blessing.

Shabbat shalom... and God bless you!