

The opening of this week's parasha features the iconic pasuk

“רָאָה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה - See, this day I set before you blessing and curse”. We are reminded that as human beings we are imbued with the unique and most precious gift of choice. We are blessed with the ability to reason and to exercise the freedom of our will, to choose whether to obey or disobey the dictates of Hashem. However, as the pasuk reinforces, there are consequences to our choices in the form of blessing “if you obey the commandments of the LORD your God” and punishment “if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn away from the path that I enjoin upon you this day”.

The classical explanation of this verse is that the Torah is highlighting the distinct choice between two mutually exclusive courses of action, two different approaches to life diametrically opposed to one another. However it has been pointed out that when understood this way, as two separate and distinct things בְּרָכָה *or* קְלָלָה, blessing *or* curses, for the vast majority of us there would seem to be nothing to choose from. Why would anyone of sound mind opt for the קְלָלָה?

However the pasuk can also be rendered literally, “I set before you בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה a blessing *and* a curse”, a combined entity rather than separate. In every situation there is the opportunity to bring out the positive *and* the negative, to turn it into a circumstance of blessing or curse. Even when it seems clear to us that it is one or the other, there is always the opportunity to turn it around.

At times when there seems to be קְלָלָה in our lives we often have the choice to reassess our perspectives and turn it into a wondrous blessing. I think we can relate this to the last number of months as we have all endeavored to make the most of our lockdown reality and quarantined existence. Amid the pain, suffering and

economic decline which can only be described as a קְלָלָה, individuals and communities throughout the world have sought to find the opportunities for blessing hidden therein. So many have used the opportunity of solitude for personal reflection, to take on hobbies and expand their knowledge through online courses and reading. People have willingly taken advantage of the situation to spend time with family members like never before, without the pressures of having to go to work or rushing out the house.

However, of course, the converse is also true. Just as we can turn the קְלָלָה into בְּרָכָה so too it is our responsibility to ensure that the blessings we receive are used in the correct way and do not serve to lead us astray. For example, wealth is often considered a great blessing and one can use their wealth to do much good in the world, however it is all too well known that wealth can change one's priorities, skew their perspective and lead to terrible consequences.

When we think of how our lives have changed since the onset of the pandemic, one area which has undergone a major transformation is how we connect with Shabbat and our religious observance. While ostensibly the inability to daven in our regular minyanim and convene in large crowds at shul has certainly been a negative repercussion of the Covid-19 crisis, I have heard from many people that it has also brought out a number of positives. Some have found enjoyment in the relaxed pace at which they can daven, not feeling pressured by those around them to speed up or slow down. Davening alone frees us from the distractions of others talking and the temptation to talk ourselves. We have been afforded the opportunity to work on our private *teffilot* and enhance our *kavanah*. I have heard that while people certainly miss hearing *Kriyat HaTorah*, they now spend time on Shabbat morning reading

through the *parasha* with a care and precision that previously they had not had the time to do. These are just a few examples of how with the correct attitude we can find the good in the seemingly bad, how Hakadosh Baruch Hu sets before us circumstances which are both blessing and curses.

However, as noted above, blessings in all forms can quickly lead us into murky waters. Despite the lack of ideal circumstances, for a great number of us the opportunity to daven in minyanim is now available and has been grasped by members who frequent one of our daily and Shabbat minyanim. Yet, there are still a large number of people who choose not to daven in a minyan either during the week or on Shabbat but prefer to remain at home. While for those who are considered high-risk or genuinely feel uncomfortable putting themselves in a public space, **staying at home is the correct and halakhically advised thing to do**, yet for those of us who are back at work, shopping in supermarkets and most crucially socializing outside of our homes, it seems to me that the *brachot* that were drawn out of our isolation have the potential to lead us further in to קְלָלָהּ. It seems that for some of us we are willing to breach our isolation for play-dates or meeting up with friends, yet not when continuing to *daven* alone is more convenient than going to *minyan*.

We must be acutely aware of the crossroads at which we now stand, which calls for a constant evaluation of our priorities. I cannot emphasise enough that the unfortunate reality for some, is that minyan attendance is tragically not an option, which makes it all the more difficult to understand that others would choose to

neglect it. If there was ever a time for our minyanim to be overflowing with people and *teffilot*, it should be now as we face continuing uncertainty in all areas of life.

While the minyanim are not as tuneful as they should be, the social aspect all but removed and the lack of Youth Program a complication that young families must contend with, davening with a minyan and shul involvement needs to be highlighted as an intrinsic part of Jewish life.

בְּרַכָּה וּקְלָלָה - רַיָּא הָ אֲנִי נִתֵּן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרַכָּה וּקְלָלָה:
For those of us who *do* have choice, what will it be?