



# YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREAT NECK

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## The Parsha in Practice

### Jewish Vision

Moshe begins our parsha offering the Jewish people the deceptively simple choice between blessing and curse. "See! I give you today (a choice of) a blessing and a curse. The blessing, when you listen to the commandments of God your Lord, which I command you today. The curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of God your Lord, and you deviate from the path which I command you today." In this formulation lies the fundamental challenge and opportunity of free will. As he lays out these extreme choices of blessing and curse, Moshe reminds us that only we have the ability to decide our destiny.



What is curious about these words and these choices is that Moshe presents them with the word "Re'eh," instructing them to "see." Moshe should be asking for them to *listen* to what he is saying, not to see it. What then is the implication of "see?"

The answer can be found in a Midrash that offers the following parable to explain these words:

*An old man sat on a highway from which there branched two roads, one full of thorns at the beginning but clear at the end, and the other clear at the beginning but full of thorns at the end. He sat at the fork of the road and warned the travelers saying, "Although you see thorns there, travel this road because it will eventually clear." Those who were wise enough to listen would have some difficulty at first but went in peace and arrived in peace, but those that did not listen would stumble in the end.*

Not satisfied with the simple reading of this choice between blessing and curse, the midrash instead describes the reality of decision making. It is rare that a dilemma present itself with such drastic options – good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, blessing vs. curse. Most difficult choices present themselves in nuanced shades of color along a spectrum of "right" possibilities. Particularly,

some choices might appear to be immediately beneficial but after a while may prove to be destructive, while others present as difficult but may end up rewarding.

This is the thorny reality of choice and the Midrash is teaching us that this is the message Moshe is trying to impart to us, that to choose correctly requires one to “see” ahead, beyond the moment and to see farther on, towards the implications of the decisions we make on our future. The choices of life and death, and blessing and curse are never so straightforward. The deeper meaning Moshe is trying to impart to the people is that to choose correctly, one needs vision, and the ability to see past the momentary gratification or the periods of difficulty to correctly discern the proper path towards attaining blessing and evading the curse.

There is another element to the vision required of free will as well. The Kli Yakar points out that the tense in the first verse changes from “re’eh,” in the singular, to “lifneichem,” which is in the plural. Moshe is saying to the individual that he should see that G-d has placed the choice of blessing and curse before the group. Why does the pasuk make this shift?

The Kli Yakar explains this anomaly using a famous concept quoted in the Gemara Kiddushin (40b). The Gemara there relates that:

One should always see themselves as balanced between guilt and innocence. If one does a mitzvah, he is praised because he has tipped himself towards innocence. If one commits a sin, woe is he who has tipped towards guilt. R’ Elazar the son of Shimon says: since the entire world is judged by the majority as well as the individual, one who does a mitzvah is praised because he tipped himself and the entire world towards innocence while woe to he who commits a sin for he has tipped himself and the entire world towards guilt.

The Kli Yakar explains that indeed, the shift in the verse from singular to plural is to indicate that the singular decision affects the plurality of humanity, and the individual must recognize that he is responsible for the blessing or curse around him.

Perhaps this is another possible meaning of Moshe’s exhortation to “see” the choice before them. Aside from the need to – as Stephen Covey writes – “begin with the end in mind,” and see past the momentary thorns towards the straight path ahead, there is another type of vision required. This is not a far reaching vision, but a lateral one, one that focuses on the periphery and requires us to see the consequences of the decisions we make to those on our side. We need to be aware of the ripple effect our actions have on our neighbors, our communities and as R’ Elazar says, on the entire world. With this in mind, Moshe’s choice between blessing and curse is not simple at all, because to correctly choose we must truly “see,” and be informed by Jewish vision – the ability to see beyond the moment and beyond ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach