

Rabbi Noah Arnow  
Kol Rinah  
Parashat Re'eh  
August 12, 2023 / 25 Av 5783

## The Penny and the Whip

*If you want to convince a child to study, show the child a penny and a whip and say, "if you study, you'll get the penny. If you don't study, you'll feel the whip." This is done because the child is too young to understand that being able to study is a joy and not being able to study is a misfortune. Only when the child is older and more mature will you no longer need mention the penny or the whip. For then the child will understand that one should want to study of one's own accord, because the opportunity to study is a blessing and ignorance is a misfortune.*

*Therefore, Moshe said to the Jews, "Behold—ראה": look at yourself, O Israel, and be ashamed. Look where you are after forty long years of toil and trials. "I set before you a blessing and a curse": After all this, I still must confront you with the choice between a blessing and a curse, a penny and a whip. "The blessing, if you shall listen": By this time you should have been able to understand that "listening" is its own blessing, "and the curse if you shall not hearken": and that failure to hearken is its own curse. But after all these years, you still are no better than a small child who must be goaded by promises of reward and threats of punishment!*

Rabbi David of Lelov, who wrote this (quoted in Ma'ayanah Shel Torah on Re'eh), has a pretty harsh view of the Israelites, even in Deuteronomy. We still need the penny and the whip, blessings and curses, to impel us, compel us, towards listening to and obeying the commandments. And this is obviously not an approach to education I'm inclined to take with kids, ever.

I do want to take some time to rephrase the question, the challenge, for us, who are not Israelites but Jews, not with Moses but here in shul, who may not feel obligated in or motivated by a life devoted to mitzvot, because I think the question is profound, nonetheless.

Here's how I might rephrase Rabbi David of Lelov's implicit question for us. We have before us every day, every hour, every few minutes, so many choices. Who to say hi to, what to eat, to daven or let our minds wander, to let our minds wander to thinking about lunch or to our friend who is sick. To exercise or not, to call a friend or family member, or not, to make sure we listen with real interest, curiosity, attention and compassion in a conversation, or to just share what's going on with us, our complaints, our brags?

Sometimes, the "right" answer is very clear. Sometimes, there are lots of right answers. But to make a right choice, when we know what it is, do we need to have the penny and the whip in view, the resulting blessing or curse? Or is merely knowing what the right thing is enough, without needing to calculate the costs and benefits?

For all of us, for each of us, there are some areas we need more pennies and whips, and others where we can do the right thing on our own. Some of us need more discipline when it comes to social interactions, whether to have them, or have them in the healthiest ways. Some of us can do the social well, but taking care of our bodies requires more pennies and whips.

How many of us can easily make the right spiritual choices, where there are rarely any pennies or whips, or external rewards or punishments.

And even when there are external negative consequences (aka, whips), it's not always enough to get us to change our behavior.

What I know about myself, and what I assume about everyone is that I, that we all, may not yet be able to act how we want to and make the best decisions without external consequences, but based only on what is objectively right and holy. But I, but we, want to. We want to eat healthfully without needing the doctor to tell us that we'll die if we eat too much salt or sugar. We want to be there for the people in our lives because it's the right thing to do, without doing it instrumentally, so that they'll be there for us when we need them.

There's a word, though, in the opening verse of our parasha (Dt. 11:26) that Rabbi David of Lelov does not comment on. ראה אנוכי נותן לפניכם היום—See, I place before you *today* blessing and curse.

Today. The word “today, היום,” is superfluous. The verse would read well if it said, ראה אנוכי נותן לפניכם ברכה וקללה—See I put before you blessing and curse. But what does “today” mean? God renews the world each day, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev in his work Kedushat Levi (on Dt. 11:26) reminds us. God gives new illumination and sends out new kindnesses each day. Hence, a person who serves God receives illumination and new insight each day, something they had not known the day before. Each day you will receive a blessing and a new kindness.

In our struggles to be the best versions of ourselves, to choose life, and the justice, and health, and love, to choose the penny and not the whip, we are, I believe, pursuing and seeking and serving God, or that which is holy.

When we are trying to choose right, every single day is a new chance to get it right, to get it better. And I don't know if it's true, but imagine God were watching your every decision, every day, and rooting for you. Not offering you a penny or threatening a whipping. But God would, like a proud parent, smile, and be so happy for you, if you made a good choice, a good decision, and so much more so if it was without seeing the penny or the whip. That's what I want for my kids—for them to make good choices even when there's no external reward or consequence. That's who I want to be. That's who you want to be.

And that's who God wants us to be. Moses may have gotten frustrated with the Israelites, who he thinks should have known better. But God is patient, endlessly proud, and offering us a new today every day.

Shabbat shalom.