

## Sorting our Blessings and Curses

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The Torah portion this week makes it sound so easy. “See, I have set before you the blessing and the curse.” Of course, you would choose the blessing; who would choose the curse?

But unfortunately, in the real world it’s not so easy.

Already in the Talmud, they note that sometimes what seems like a curse can really be a blessing, and vice versa. To prove their point, they tell the story of a trip that Rabbi Akiva took to a town far from his home. When he got there, no one offered him hospitality for the night, which was unusual in those days, and deeply disappointing to him. Lacking a Motel 6, he was forced to find a place to sleep on a neighboring hillside. That seemed like a curse. Further, the lamp he was carrying blew out in a harsh wind, so he was left in the dark. During the night his donkey ran away, and the rooster that was with him was eaten by a bobcat. At first when he got up in the morning, he felt that he was cursed; what an ill-omened trip. Then he traveled back down the hill to town to purchase some food. He discovered that in the night the town had been set upon by robbers. Not only did they steal everything of value but they killed all the local inhabitants. Had he been in town, had his lamp been visible, had his donkey brayed, had his rooster crowed, he might have been a victim as well. *Gam zu letovah*, this was all for the good, he realized. What seemed like a curse had been a blessing.

One challenge in life is our inability to immediately see the end results of our actions, to know whether, for example, the broken leg that keeps us from going out is a curse, or whether as in a story from the pandemic of 1918, it is actually a life saver—in short, to know whether something is really a blessing or a curse. But it is also true that many times the blessing and the curse are actually mixed together. Rabbi Menachem Nahum Twersky of Chernobyl, the 18<sup>th</sup> century scholar who wrote the book *Meor Einayim* (Light for the Eyes), points out that good and bad are embedded in all things. It takes clear sight to see both of them at the same time. The gift of the promised land, which is discussed in this portion, is a great good, but it also contains the seeds of temptations that might lead the people astray. It is similar with good fortune. Judaism was not romantic about poverty, having known it too well in too many centuries, but the dangers associated with wealth are also discussed. Wealth is a good but also contains seeds of danger, particularly the development of an outlook of acquisition that will never allow for inner peace. As Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) wrote, “No one departs from this world with even half of his desire gratified; if he has a hundred, he wants two hundred.” We must cultivate a sense of satisfaction and gratitude, rather than endless desire, as it will serve us well for all our material wants.

Related to all things being a mixture of blessing and curse, Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berdichev, a Hasidic rabbi also from Eastern Europe, said there was one more thing to watch out for. Sometimes even the doing of a mitzvah can lead not to blessing but to a curse. He was thinking of those who after doing the right thing become so filled with pride that instead of rising to a higher spiritual level, they fall. They become sure of themselves and their holiness, and disparaging of

others, losing sight of the key commandment of loving your neighbor as yourself. Here a blessing, the blessing of doing a mitzvah, leads to the curses of intolerance and certitude, which are inimical to true spiritual growth.

Finally, there is one more aspect of this opening verse in our Torah portion this week about the blessing and the curse. The portion begins with *re'eh* (see), the singular imperative, see, but continues *natati lifneichem*, I have placed before you, with *you* being in the plural here. Did the Torah lack a good editor? What is the meaning of this seeming grammatical inconsistency? For the rabbinic commentators, there is a message even in this tiny detail. They note, when we sort out blessings and curses, it is natural that our focus is on the impact on ourselves. But as this verse comes to remind us, it is not always about me; it should be about us. It's not just keeping our own lives in order, but also working together with our neighbors, that will determine whether we are moving toward blessing or curse. In a time like our own where it seems enough just to take care of our own families, it is important to have this reminder that it is not just about our individual character and our own households, but also about how we chose to manage our communities.

May our lives be filled with true blessings. May we be alert to the hidden curses that accompany them and the way that good and evil run together. And finally, may we seek blessing not only for ourselves but also for all those around us.