

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**S**ee [re'eh] this day I set before you a blessing and a curse: A blessing when you listen [tishme'u] to the commandments of the Lord your G-d... and a curse if you do not listen to the commandments...you shall give the blessing on Mt. Gerizim and the curse on Mt. Eyval...” (Deut. 11:26-29)

This rather momentous exhortation contains a number of linguistic and conceptual problems: First of all, the very opening word, "see" (re'eh in Hebrew), is an imperative in the singular form; the verse goes on to state "when you listen" (Hebrew tishme'u) which is in second-person plural. Why the change?

Secondly, the text goes on to say that there will be a blessing "when you listen" (Hebrew asher tishme'u) and a curse "if you don't" (Heb. im lo tishme'u). Here again, why the change?

Thirdly, why the necessity of the two high mountains surrounding Shekhem (modern-day Nablus)? What do these mountains signify?

And, finally, the content of the blessings and curses come later on in the Bible (Chapter 27:11ff) with the concluding words being, "These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses to conclude with the children of Israel in the Land of Moab in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb (Mt. Sinai)" (Deut 28:69). What is the significance of this added covenant just prior to their entry into Israel?

The two majestic mountains just outside of Shekhem symbolize the difficult climb necessary for the Israelites to take in order for them to even begin to fulfill their G-d - given mandate of becoming a holy nation and a Kingdom of priest-teachers to the world; and indeed this is the third covenant we entered into with

G-d just prior to our entry into the Land of Israel. In addition to the Covenant at Sinai, the religious covenant of the Ten Commandments and the 613 laws of our Torah, we have a mission to become a light unto the nations of the world, at the very least to teach the seven universal laws of morality to all of the people of the globe (Maimonides, Laws of Kings 10,8).

Once the Israelites cross over the River Jordan, at the place from which the Israelites first entered their land and the logical place at which representatives of the world would later enter and exit the Jewish land, they were commanded to set up large stones coated with plaster and write upon them these laws of morality - "in a very clear manner of explanation," (Hebrew: be'er heitev; and the midrashic explanation: translated into all seventy languages, Deut. 27: 1-8). These stones would graphically demonstrate our message to the whole of human civilization. Such a taxing and daunting universal task will seem less daunting when we consider the words of Dr. Martin Luther King who used the metaphor of the mountain in his great 'I Have a Dream' speech to the American people in 1963, "...I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight...."

Essentially, the way to bring the exalted and distant mountain within our grasp is to climb it, step by step, for each step of our ascent makes the mountain seem lower and lower.

In order for us to begin to carry out our mission to the world, we must first become a holy nation ourselves. The Bible tells us that the blessing will come when we keep the commandments, in an immediate fashion. After all, "the reward of a commandment is the commandment itself," the satisfaction we receive from helping a person in distress, the familial cohesiveness and inner peace we take with us as we observe the Sabbath day. If, G-d forbid, we do not listen to the commandments, retribution may not come immediately, but eventually evil bears its own destructive fruits.

The great Hassidic Sage known as the Shpolle Zeide expressed this truth in a very memorable way. He tells how, as a child, he would go to a shvitz (steam bath, or less sophisticated sauna) with his father, who would pour freezing cold water upon him just as he would begin to perspire profusely. "Ooh," he would

Mazal tov to Evie & Alden Leifer and
Suzanne & Avi Stokar of Teaneck, NJ
upon the marriage this past week of their children
Mira & Daniel

Mazel tov to the grandparents
Bubbie & Zaydie Stokar
Bubbie & Zaydie Lupin
Grandma & Poppie Lipmanowicz
Grandma & Poppie Leifer
and to the entire mishpacha

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inadvertently scream as the cold water contacted his burning hot flesh, but - after cooling down a bit - would exclaim happily, "Aah." "Remember my child the lesson of the ooh and aah," The Shpolle would hear from his father. "Before (and often even during) the commission of a transgression, you have physical enjoyment - aah. But afterwards, when you ponder your sin and suffer its consequences - ooh! In the case of a mitzvah, however, you might cry ooh when you have to get up early for prayers or for a lesson of daf yomi, but in reflection of your religious accomplishment, you will always exclaim aah afterwards. Make sure you conclude your life with an aah!"

Why is the first opening word Re'eh, see, in the singular? Two summers ago Hezbollah, agents of Iran and Syria, were shooting Katyusha rockets into Northern Israel, making the lives of the residents virtually impossible. Many inhabitants of more southern areas opened their hearts and homes to their embattled fellow citizens while our soldiers fought the enemy on the ground and from the air in Lebanon.

In Efrat, we opened our Neveh Shmuel High School dormitories, kitchen, and dining hall, and many families opened their homes to temporary refugees from Karmiel and Bar Yohai. These groups included Sefardi haredim together with Russian immigrants, some of whom came with their Christian, cross-bearing spouses. Almost miraculously, the spirit of one nation Israel conquered all differences, and everyone got along famously.

One of my neighbors, who hosted six individuals for 6 weeks, breakfast, lunch and dinner, invited me and my wife to a special Friday evening meal at their home cooked by their guests (under supervision of the hostess). Before the hostess lit Shabbat candles, the three women (one of whom was wearing a cross) asked if they could join their hostess in the kindling of the Shabbat lights; I ruled in the affirmative. That entire Shabbat I was certain that the Messiah would come - and I know that he made significant headway in his journey. In order to truly climb the mountain, we must all take the upward trudge, collectively, as one. © 2008 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“**S**ee (i.e. take notice, said in the singular form, telling each individual to take notice) [that] I am today placing before you (said in the plural form, to the nation as a whole) blessing(s) and curse(s)” (Devarim 11:26). One of the issues discussed by the commentators is the change from the singular ("re'ay" rather than "re'u") to the plural ("lifnaychem" rather than "lefanecha"). Another issue discussed is why Moshe refers now ("today") to the blessings and curses that will be made on Mt. Grizim and Mt. Aival, if the commandment to do so will not be given until much later (27:11-26).

The bulk of the commandments that Moshe clarifies in Sefer Devarim are taught between Moshe's saying that he is placing the blessings and curses before them (in our Parasha) and his actually doing so (in Parashas Ki Savo). So much so, that the Abarbanel says that everything up until now (in Sefer Devarim) has really been an introduction. It was necessary for Moshe to convey the points made in the previous Parashos, such as why it took 40 years to get to the Promised Land and an overview of the specialness of G-d's commandments, before he could accomplish his main mission in Sefer Devarim-explaining, in detail, the commandments of the Torah, to this generation, before he dies. This is the final piece of the introduction-to take notice of the fact that the mitzvos constitute both blessings and curses; blessings for those that keep them and curses for those that don't. There's no middle ground here (see Sefornu); you can't do nothing (no bad to others but nothing positive either, including not keeping the mitzvos) and escape unscathed. Following the Torah will ultimately lead to blessings, while ignoring it will bring a tragic ending.

History has shown that this is certainly true for the Jewish people as a nation. Although there is a concern that individuals might think they can "follow their own ideas" and still "have peace" (29:18), the curses will eventually catch up with them (29:20). It is not enough to make sure that there is a religious community observing the Torah without being part of it. Donating to a synagogue is important, but not more important than going there to daven there regularly. Supporting Torah study is extremely praiseworthy, making the "Zevulun" a partner with the "Yissochar," but every individual must learn Torah every single day as well.

As Moshe was about to begin explaining the commandments, he wanted every single individual to pay attention, because they were not commandments that were just a communal responsibility, but are required for each and every individual as well. The blessings and curses weren't placed upon the nation as a whole, but on each individual that does or does not

"uphold the words of this Torah to fulfill them" (27:26). Moshe therefore told each individual to "take notice" (in the singular), because the commandments being placed before all of "you" (plural) apply to all of you equally and individually, and each individual will be either blessed or cursed. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There is a shift in mood in the book of Dvarim beginning with this week's parsha. It no longer is a review of the events of the desert or of the Exodus from Egypt. Moshe no longer will concentrate on the faults and failures of the generation that left Egypt - a generation with such high hopes that saw them dashed by their stubbornness and lack of faith. The past is the past and it cannot be changed. G-d, so to speak, will not turn the film back again for some sort of replay.

The direction of Moshe is now the future, the entry into the Land of Israel and the establishment of a normative Jewish society in that land. Moshe warns the Jewish people that the lessons of the past should not be forgotten or ignored. Their consequences are likely to be repeated if the Jewish people will backslide again.

Life and death, good and evil, success and failure - these are the choices that lie before the Jewish people. And Moshe advises us to choose wisely, to treasure life and do good and honor tradition and Torah. The future always depends upon making wiser choices than were made in the past.

The word re'eih which means "see" is the key word in the parsha. This entails a vision for the future and an understanding as to its new demands and changing circumstances. Moshe turns the attention of the Jewish people to its future in the Land of Israel and to new commandments not mentioned before in the Torah. It appears that these new commandments are brought to the fore in order to help the Jewish people be successful in their new environment.

The holy days of the Jewish calendar appear in detail in this week's parsha. In the Land of Israel these holy days had a physical and agricultural content as well as the inherent spiritual nature. In the long and dark Jewish exile, the physical and agricultural aspect of the holidays was lost but the remaining spiritual and holy qualities of those days nevertheless sustained the Jewish people.

The early pioneers who returned to the Land of Israel, secularized and Marxist to the hilt but nonetheless Jewish, attempted to reinsert the physical and agricultural qualities of the holidays of the year and at the same time to discard completely the spiritual and Torah qualities of those days. Unfortunately, that experiment has proved to be a dismal failure.

The holidays are bereft of any spiritual content and also of any agricultural or national meaning. Moshe would caution us to begin again, to include life,

goodness and tradition into the holy days so that they would have true meaning and impact - and through them to revive our attachment to this holy land and its bountiful produce.

I think that the revival of the true spirit of the holidays is one of the great challenges that face us in our land today. In its own way, it is a key to solving many of the difficulties that bedevil us currently. Moshe bids us to look clearly at all of these matters and to decide wisely. © 2008 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's portion - according to many commentators, including Rashi - makes it clear that G-d's words to the Jewish people were not all recorded in the ones found in the Torah. We are told in this parsha, "and you shall slaughter as I've commanded you" (Deuteronomy 12:21). One would expect the details of how to slaughter to be spelled out - after all G-d says "as I've commanded you." Yet, nowhere in the Torah are the specifics of how to ritually slaughter mentioned. It follows then that the details, as our text indicates, were spelled out by G-d, although they're not found anywhere in the Torah text.

This is not the only place where this phenomenon occurs. The Torah, for example, states "observe the Sabbath day" (Deuteronomy 5:12). Yet, the specifics of how to observe the Shabbat are not found in the Torah.

All this points to a divine aspect of the Torah that was given alongside the written text, this is known as the Torah she-be'al peh, the Oral Law. Additionally, not only were many of G-d's words transmitted orally, but also the words of our sages were designated to be passed through the oral tradition.

This begs a fundamental question: Why was there a need to have an oral transmission - why wasn't it all written down? Several answers come to mind.

Ironically, transmission of ideas through the generations is more exact through the oral legacy. Once written, especially in ancient times when very few copies existed, it was easy for one scribe to tinker with texts and change them, whether purposefully or not. For this reason, many forms of contemporary law, are not written down.

Another possibility: Had everything been written down, it would have sent the message that rabbinic law is closed and that the process of interpretation had come to a halt. The oral transmission sent the message that rabbis in each generation, basing themselves on the earlier text and principles of developing the law, could continue to evaluate and

contribute to an understanding in their own particular times.

One last thought. Had everything been written down, a rebbe, a teacher of Torah would have been unnecessary-after all, it's all in the book. The oral transmission made a rebbe, a living person who could teach and lead by example, indispensable. Ultimately, such personalities are necessary for Torah to be sustained.

In time, however, the Jewish community was no longer capable of remembering the oral dictates, and hence, we were left with no choice but to commit the oral law to writing. The challenge, even as we study the oral law from a written text, is to recognize why it was, at first, not put to paper-to remember the precision of the law, that it is ongoing, and it requires a rebbe, a living role model, to teach it. Through both avenues; through the oral and the written, the Torah of G-d remains dynamic and alive. © 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

Between the Lines

In the opening verse of this week's parsha, Moses speaks to the Jewish people and says, "See (re'eh), I have set before you today a blessing and a curse" (Deut. 11:26). The word "re'eh" seems out of place here. Moses is not showing anything to the people; he is merely informing them about the consequences of their actions! Why does the Torah present this information in terms of "seeing," when it would have made more sense to use the idea of "hearing"?

Later in the parsha, the verse instructs us "to do what is good and upright in the eyes of G-d" (Deut. 12:28). Rashi (quoting the Midrash Sifri) divides this verse into two parts: the word "good" (tov) refers to doing good in the eyes of G-d, whereas the word "upright" (yashar) refers to acting righteously in the eyes of other people. This is a very puzzling comment. Since the verse itself links both of these qualities ("good" and "upright") to G-d, how can the Midrash claim that the word "upright" refers to other people? This seems contrary to the literal meaning of the text!

A passage in the Talmud (Brachot 28b) will help us resolve both difficulties:

"The students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai came to visit him when he was on his deathbed. They gathered around their teacher and requested a blessing. Rabbi Yochanan replied, 'May it be G-d's will that your fear of Heaven be as great as your fear of people.' This unusual blessing surprised the students: 'Is that all?' they exclaimed. It would seem that a person's fear of G-d should be even greater than his fear of people! Rabbi Yochanan responded: 'You

should know that when a person commits a crime, his first thought is always, 'Did anybody see me?'"

This Talmudic passage provides an insight into the Midrash's division of the verse in Parshat Re'eh. The Torah counsels, "Do what is good and upright in the eyes of G-d." But how are we to know what is "good" in G-d's eyes? The seemingly superfluous word "upright" is included in the verse to teach us the following lesson. We do what is good in the eyes of G-d by imagining what our conduct would be if we were in the presence of important people. Acting righteously, with other people in mind, is a prerequisite to pleasing to the Divine. This interpretation does not contradict the literal meaning of the verse; rather, it teaches us an approach we must take in our daily lives to help ensure that we are doing what is "good in G-d's eyes."

Now we can understand the use of the word "re'eh" in terms of this idea. The Talmud teaches, "Who is wise? One who sees the future" (Tamid 32a). It is interesting that the Talmud does not attribute wisdom to one who knows the future. Instead, the word "see" is used. This teaches us an important lesson. A person who knows what will happen may not change his behavior- but a person who vividly sees, with his mind's eye, the potential outcome of his actions, may choose to act differently.

(We all know that our time on earth is finite, yet this knowledge of our own mortality rarely spurs us to make positive changes in our lives. However, if we were to see, in our imagination, the actual moment of our death, that frightening vision of stretchers and paramedics would make us aware of our true priorities far more powerfully than mere knowledge!)

This is why Moses uses the word "re'eh" in addressing the Jewish people. Moses does not want the people simply to listen to his words-he wants them to vividly imagine the results of obeying or disobeying them.

May we all be blessed with a dynamic imagination that will lead us to an awareness of G-d's Presence. May we use our vision to truly see the ramifications of our action, speech and thought so that we can live our lives according to what is good and upright in G-d's eyes. © 2008 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.com

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak, Yeshivat Har Etzion

The mitzva of Shemitta related to loans is mentioned in this week's Torah portion (Devarim 15:1-11), requiring that all loans to be cancelled once in seven years. Surprisingly, the Torah itself does not make any direct link between monetary Shemitta, which appears only in the book of Devarim, and the mitzva to let the land rest, which appears in the book of Vayikra. This leads to the conclusion that in essence

the two commandments are different from each other, which might have several practical consequences.

One of the practical differences might be related to the mitzva of "Hakhel" ? gathering the nation together at the end of Shemitta? which appears in the Torah portion of Vayelech (31:10-13). The description of this mitzva refers to the time when it takes place- "...at the end of seven years, at the time of the Shemitta year" [31:10]. But which Shemitta does this verse refer to, the one related to the land or the one related to loans? It is easy to show that the relevant Shemitta is the one for loans, in view of two phrases in the Torah. First, this phrase is reminiscent of the text in this week's portion about Shemitta of loans: "At the end of seven years shall you make a Shemitta" [15:1]. In addition, the phrase "the year of Shemitta" appears in the Torah only with respect to monetary Shemitta, as is written in this week's portion, "the year of Shemitta is close" [15:9]. Shemitta of the land is never referred to in this way in the Torah. This implies that the mitzva of Hakhel is linked to monetary Shemitta. It is important to understand the significance of this link.

The goal of Hakhel is to teach the nation of Yisrael to fear G-d, as is noted explicitly in the passage. "Gather the nation together... so that they will listen and they will learn to fear your G-d... And their sons, who did not know, will listen and learn to have fear of your G-d." [31:12-13]. The fear is especially important with respect to monetary Shemitta, as the Torah emphasizes in this week's portion: "Be wary, lest your heart will act in an evil way, saying: The seventh year, the year of Shemitta, is close. And you will look with evil at your poor brother and not give him a loan. And he will cry out about you to G-d and you will have sinned. Give to him, and do not feel bad when you give to him, because in return for this G-d will bless you." [15:9-10]. The Torah warns of a situation where people will refrain from making loans as Shemitta approaches, fearing that they will not be repaid. It therefore warns the people not to refrain from giving loans but rather to be generous, even though there is a good possibility that the result will be financial damage. And this is the purpose of the mitzva of Hakhel? to strengthen the fear of G-d among Bnei Yisrael, so that they will perform the mitzva of giving a loan even if it might not be repaid.

With respect to refraining from agricultural work, the Torah describes a different fear among Bnei Yisrael? "What will we eat in the seventh year?" [Vayikra 25:20]. But in that case the Torah's command is not to observe the mitzva out of fear of G-d but rather to understand that G-d will help the nation of Yisrael, and to observe the mitzva out of a sense of faith in G-d, who will send His blessing to the land, so that its crop will suffice for three years, starting from the sixth year (25:21-22). Thus, in summary, Shemitta of the land teaches man to have faith, while monetary Shemitta

teaches us fear, commanding us to give a loan to a poor person even if it means a personal financial loss.

RABBI ZEV LEFF

Outlooks & Insights

“Grant truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham, as you swore to our forefathers from ancient times." (Micha 7:20)

In the first, second, fourth, and fifth years of the seven-year Shmitah cycle, Jews living in Israel were commanded to separate a tenth of their crops and bring them to Jerusalem to eat (ma'aser sheni). In the third and six years of the cycle, that tenth was given to the poor as ma'aser ani.

At first glance, it would seem that the order of ma'aser sheni and ma'aser ani should have been reversed. Why were the landowners not required to first share with the poor and only subsequently to enjoy their produce in Jerusalem. In other words, why was ma'aser ani not given at the beginning of the three-year cycle, and only then ma'aser sheni?

Maimonides (Gifts to the Poor 10:2) writes that one must give tzedakah with a joyous countenance, and that giving with a disgruntled mien negates the mitzvah. Thus we see that the attitude with which one gives tzedakah is intrinsic to the mitzvah itself.

The prophet Michah (5:17) defines that which G-d wants from us as "to do justice, love chesed (kindness), and walk modestly with G-d." And in the concluding blessing of the Amidah we thank G-d for giving us, "through the light of His countenance a Torah of life and a love of chesed." It is not enough to do chesed. One must love chesed.

More than any other positive mitzvah, writes Maimonides, tzedakah is a sign of the essence of a Jew. It is the very fiber of Jewish existence and the source of our future redemption. Similarly, a good heart, which is the basis of all good character traits (Avot 2:13), refers to an attitude which fosters chesed.

The goal of our striving in this world is the perfection of our souls. The mitzvot are the means to achieving this goal. There are two mitzvot which enable us to emulate G-d as He relates to us. One is Torah study. Through the study of Torah we attach ourselves to G-d's mind, as it were, as He created the world.

The second is chesed. The basis of all existence is G-d's desire to do chesed to His creation. Hence, when we do acts of chesed with a strong desire, we follow in G-d's footsteps.

Abraham discovered G-d through the characteristic of chesed of recognizing the chesed inherent in the creation. He so longed to perform acts of chesed, that even when he sat in great agony after his own brit milah, he suffered when no guests appeared. Our mother Rivka, too, was distinguished by her love of chesed. It was for that quality alone that Eliezer tested her.

We are now prepared to understand the order of ma'aser sheni and ma'aser ani. By commanding us to bring one-tenth of our crops to Jerusalem to rejoice there, G-d taught us two vital lessons. The first is that our material possessions are a present from G-d and He can dictate how we use that material bounty. The second is that using material wealth in the way prescribed by G-d generates feelings of joy and sanctity.

Once we have internalized these lessons in the first two years of the cycle, we can offer that bounty to the poor in the third year-not perfunctorily, but with a true love of chesed.

The letters of Elul hint to the verse, "I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me," signifying our intensified relationship with G-d leading up to the High Holidays. To achieve this we must condition ourselves not only to do chesed, but to love it. © 2008 Rabbi Z. Leff & aish.com

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

See, I place before you this day blessing and curse. The blessing is for listening to the commandments of G-d, your G-d, which I command you today. The curse is for not listening to the commandments of G-d, your G-d, and for turning away from the way which I command you today, and going after foreign G-ds which you did not know. (Devarim 11:26-28)

It seems like a no-brainer. Who in their right mind would want to go against G-d, and lose everything? No one. Hence, the Talmud writes: A person does not sin unless a spirit of insanity enters him. (Sotah 3a) However, if it is so insane to sin, why are the shuls packed on Yom Kippur? They are supposed to be synagogues, not sanitariums. And, judging by the sincerity of the people who pray around me, they take the viduy-the confessional prayer-quite seriously, as if they truly have what to atone for.

I certainly do, and I seem to function somewhat normally on a day-to-day basis. At least I think I do-I remember once being at the check-in counter of an airport when a man, in line ahead of me, lost his temper at the airline employee behind the counter. Obviously, something had not gone with his reservation, and extremely disappointed, he gave the airline employee a piece of his mind, and loud enough for all of us to share. It was embarrassing for all those who could hear what was happening.

If I recall correctly, the man stormed off, seemingly oblivious to what he had done, and who had heard him. The look of anger on his face was scary, even maniacal, and I think we all felt a sigh of relief once he was gone from the area. I, for one, certainly hoped that he would not return until I was long gone.

After checking in rather smoothly, and sitting down by my gate, the events that had just transpired

went through my mind. The face of the man was still quite fresh in my mind, and I wondered what he would have done had he seen his own face in a mirror at that time. I recall once catching my own angry face in a mirror, and quite frankly, I scared myself!

Then, I tried to imagine what the angry man must be like to work with, but realized that, just because he lost his temper at the airline employee, doesn't mean that he always loses his temper, and with everyone. There are some people who are completely patient at work with their fellow employees, but monsters at home with their families. Others are just the opposite, so I wondered what people might possibly tell me about this man. Maybe at work he was completely pleasant and dependable. Maybe he had just had a bad day.

At that point, I then considered myself. I wondered about my own snapping points, what it takes for me to "lose it," which I have done on too many occasions. And that, in spite of the fact that I am familiar with the Talmud's warning that losing one's temper is like worshipping idols (Shabbos 105b), of that it is bad for memory (Pesachim 66b). What were we just talking about again?

Then, I considered how many times I have knowingly broken the Torah. Not willingly broken the Torah, for I would never want to rebel against G-d, G-d forbid. But, I pondered, how many times have I done something that I "sensed" the Torah probably does not permit, but did it anyways, as if compelled by some outside force? In other words, how many times have I watched myself fall prey to my yetzer hara, and been just too weak, for one reason or another, to do anything about it, acting at that moment instead like someone out of step with reality?

The Talmud makes an interesting statement that applies to our discussion here. It says: Woe to those who see, but know not what they see! (Chagigah 12b) It is talking about people who do not appreciate Creation for what it actually is. They may enjoy it, be fascinated by it, and even admire it, but they don't understand it as the handiwork of G-d in all its Kabbalistic glory. They deal with Creation as a 10-year might handle an expensive glass vase:

Mother: "Hey, be careful with that! That's an expensive vase!"

Son: "How much could it possibly have cost?"

Mother: "More than you can afford to pay to replace it!"

Son: "How could something be so expensive, who would be so silly to spend that kind of money on such a simple thing?!"

At the age of 10, a child does not appreciate all the intricate craftsmanship involved in producing such a beautiful vase, or how it becomes a work of art because of it. The child only sees a vase, a different type than he is used to, but a vase nevertheless. His lack of

ability to see what went into producing the sculpted glass limits his ability to see it as it is.

To appreciate any situation in life, and to respond to it on the proper level, we must understand what went into making it. Hence, the rabbis teach:

"The world was created in 10 utterances. What does this come to teach us? Could not the world have been created in a single utterance? It was in order to exact punishment from the wicked who destroy the world which was created in 10 utterances, and to give reward to the righteous who sustain the world which was created in 10 utterances." (Pirkei Avos 5:1)

Do not think that this teaching only refers to Creation itself. For, it refers to all that exists within Creation, including every moment and opportunity of life. When a person walks up to you and annoys you in some way, seemingly for no reason, you have a choice. You can see the moment as simple and random, meaningless by virtue of the fact that it was not planned and seemingly, has little to offer you in terms of enhancing your life. Or, you can see it, in spite of its apparent simplicity, as having been orchestrated by G-d Himself.

To the extent that you do, you are sane, for, to the extent that you do is the extent to which you see reality as G-d does. Life is one big Divine conspiracy during which people and events rarely seem on the surface what they actually are inside. This way we can be rewarded for making the decision to get to the bottom of things, of people, of events, and of life itself.

And, quite amazingly, once we do, we are often surprised by how different our "acquired" perception is from the one we were given for free at the start.

Returning to the angry man at the airport, clearly he acted as if he was betrayed by the airline employee behind the counter, though she had only been doing her job. Did the airlines betray him? It sure seemed like that to the man. However, more likely he was the victim of an innocent mistake, or of a policy decision with which the man himself would agree if he was on the board of the airlines. However, one thing was for certain: no one had been out to deliberately "get" him.

What about the man himself? A maniac of a person? Unlikely. Disappointed? Understandably so. Justified in acting in such a rude and harsh way to another human being, especially in public? Certainly not, especially since the employee had remained polite and helpful, as much as she could be at that time, until the end. So, then, what went wrong? Imagine if, in the midst of the argument, a booming voice yelled down:

"It's not her fault! I arranged the entire episode!" to which the man angrily responds:

"Is that so? Well, then, who are you? The manager? The owner of the airline?"

"You could say that," the voice continues.

Turning to the person behind the counter, the man impatiently asks, "Okay, which speaker phone is he talking through?"

"Ah, sir?" the confused employee stutters. "There is no speaker phone here?"

"Don't you lie to me!" the man shouts. "Everyone can hear that voice on the speaker-phone..." the man trails off, as he sees the phone still in its cradle, and no light showing the line in use.

"Hey, is this some kind of trick?" the man asks, now confused.

"No, this is G-d speaking..." the voice now says.

"Right," he says sarcastically. "Well, that's the problem with you airline owners! You all think you're G-d! Well, let me just tell you..." he tries to say, before the voice interrupts him.

"No, this really is G-d, as in the Creator of the Universe!" at which point the man goes white in the face, realizing that the voice is coming from the thin air, and beyond. "I am the One who caused this mistake, for reasons you won't be able to fathom until years from now. This was set in motion 10 years ago, by a series of incidents that you don't even remember. This is part of a rectification for mistakes made even in your previous lifetimes."

There is a pause, as Heaven gives the man time to absorb what has been said. Then it continues:

"In fact, the employee at whom you are yelling was specifically chosen to be on duty today for you, just for this test, and everyone around you was brought here today to be a part of all of this. In fact, would you like to know what went in to arranging the airport just so for this moment and test, indeed to arrange your entire life just to have this opportunity present itself..."

Incredulous, and pale in the face, the man sits down on his suitcase, and puts his face in his hands, while everyone else around him just stands there, stunned, by the miraculous revelation of G-d's hand in everyday life.

Can anyone be the same after such an experience, or yell at another person again? And, the amazing thing is, as far-fetched as this scenario may seem, the only far-fetched part of it was the booming Heavenly voice. All the rest of it is true all the time, and you have to ask yourself, "How different would my life be if I could see it that way?"

Hence, the most important word in this week's parshah is the one we're least likely to pay attention to: see. Moshe Rabbeinu doesn't just speak about mitzvot and sins, blessings and curses. He starts off by saying "see," as if to say, "If you can't see reality properly, then you'll get confused about life, and end up pursuing that which brings curse, not blessing, while you think you are doing just the opposite."

Hence, the rabbis teach: "The secrets of G-d to those who fear Him." (Niddah 20b)

As we have said on many occasions before, the Hebrew word for "fear" is the same word as the word for "see." For, those who can "see" G-d in every aspect of life will be privy to information that others are blind to, though it may stare them right in the face. It's amazing what information surfaces, and makes a difference to our choices and responses, when we get to the bottom of life.

And, with such "secrets" comes the necessary understanding to get the blessing out of life intended for us, and to avoid the curses we are expected to avoid. And, who in their right would want to be able to that?

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DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi

The blessing, that you heed the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today." (Deuteronomy 11:27)

"The blessing"-RASHI: "On condition that you heed."

This short comment is, what I call, a Type II Rashi comment. That means that Rashi has inserted just a few of his own words in between the Torah's words. In such cases, Rashi usually is not bothered by something in the verse; rather, he wants to guide us around a possible misunderstanding. But, I would say here that in spite of the style, Rashi is bothered by something. What would you ask here?

A Question: What has Rashi told us here and why the need to comment at all? What prompted his comment? Hint: Compare our verse with the next verse.

An Answer: Verses 27 and 28 speak of the blessing and the curse that will follow as a consequence to those who follow G-d's word and those who do not. Do you see the difference between the wording of these verses?

Verse 27: "The blessing: That you heed the commandments of Hashem..."

Verse 28: "The curse: If you do not heed the commandments of Hashem..."

We have highlighted the difference between the two verses.

"The blessing that you will heed..."

"And the curse if you do not heed..."

Why does our verse use the word "that" (Hebrew "asher")? The conditional "if" (Hebrew "im") would seem more fitting. This is what we have in the next verse. This is what Rashi is responding to. How does his two-word comment help matters?

An Answer: Rashi's use of the words "on condition" (Hebrew "al menas") has a precise meaning in the Talmud. The Sages tell us that whoever says "on condition that" is as if he said "from now." This can be illustrated when we compare two sentences.

If I say to a car mechanic: "You have \$100 on the condition that you repair my car." Or if I say: "I will pay you \$100 if you repair my car."

In the first case the money is given up front with the condition that the mechanic do the work. In the second case, no money is given unless and until the work is done.

With this in mind, let us look at these verses and see what difference this verbal nuance makes. What difference do you see?

An Answer: The blessing is given "on condition," says Rashi. This means that G-d gives His blessing even before we have fulfilled His conditions. G-d is willing to give us of His bounty on credit; on the understanding that we will, in the future, fulfill His conditions. The curse, on the other hand, is not given "on condition"; it is not inflicted unless and until the people transgress G-d's commandments.

This is an encouraging and benevolent picture of G-d's ways in this world. His blessings of food, shelter and security are basic givens of this world. He placed them here for us to enjoy. Only if and when we transgress his Torah- which is a Torah of Life-are we in danger of losing these blessings. The punishments, on the other hand, come only if (when) we don't follow His ways. We could say the punishments are inherent, natural, outcomes of straying from His path, from His Torah of Life.

This idea is, in fact, built into these verses. You may have noticed that even though we are talking about conditional phrases, nowhere are the consequences mentioned. "The blessing, that you will heed the commandments of Hashem, your G-d..."

Notice that the blessing is nothing extrinsic (for example: becoming rich) to fulfilling G-d's word; it is identified with "heeding the commandments of Hashem." It is as if the Torah says: Doing good is its own reward.

Likewise, as regards the curse. The Torah says: "And the curse, if you do not heed the commandments of Hashem..." The curse, itself, is identified with not heeding the commandments. Again, the message is that doing evil is its own punishment.

The Sages in Pirkei Avos put it succinctly: "The reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah; the reward of sin is sin." © 2008 Dr. A. Bonchek & aish.com

