

Parshat Re'eh: When Curses Become Blessings

Karolyn Benger, Class of '26

See I have set before you this day a blessing and a curse; the blessing that (asher) you obey the commandments of your God that I enjoin upon you this day, and curse, if (im) you do not obey the commandments... (Devarim 11:26-28).

What a beautiful opportunity God has placed before the Jewish people! With these words God has given us the power of choice.

Each of us is capable of doing good deeds or evil ones. Each of us is given the chance to make our own decisions about how we behave toward others and toward God. We alone can decide our actions and, as a result, our fate. God has not only given us individual liberty; God has given us individual liability—the power to decide for ourselves if we should be blessed or cursed.

But are we blessed or punished if we obey or not? The language of this passage speaks of a blessing *if* you obey and a curse if you do not, yet in the Hebrew text, the words are not the same. In the case of a blessing, the verse states “asher” while for the curse it uses the term “im.”

The Sefat Emet notes that these different words reflect different expectations. Goodness, he asserts, is inherent within the Jewish people. Hence the blessing is offered—“et ha’bracha **asher** tishme’u el mitzvot Hashem Elokeichem”—**when** the Jewish people do good. Of course they will. Sin, though, is incidental, not essential. Bnei Yisrael might falter. Hence, the “if” you don’t obey—“Vehaklala ‘im’ lo tishme’u el mitzvot Hashem Elokeichem.”

Personally, I do not accept the Sefat Emet’s view that goodness exists within the Jewish people by our very nature. I believe we each make choices about how we behave and we all become the result of those choices.

Nehama Leibowitz translates the verses differently: “a blessing that you obey...a curse if you will not obey.” This does not seem to offer any choice at all. We are blessed *to* obey, implying some divine force encouraging us (or even causing us) to make the right choice. This seems more like determinism than free choice, although the curses remain *if* we don’t. This raises the question: what are these blessings? And what are the curses?

The Malbim (on 11:27) suggests that obeying the commandments is itself a blessing, a natural consequence of good actions. As he states, “The parallel is to the doctor who assures his patient that he will be well, as long as he adheres to the regimen he prescribes...” This is not determinism; the patient has the choice to act and determine the outcome that will follow. In this light, we see that God did, in fact, give us a clear choice of doing the mitzvot. The blessing is a natural consequence of doing the mitzvot while not doing the mitzvot brings upon oneself an inherent curse—in the Malbim’s example, the physical decline when one doesn’t follow the doctor’s instruction.

And this choice is yours and mine to make. Not just at the time Moses said these words but every single day, with every action we face a choice. “On this day” (hayom) we are presented with a blessing and a curse—this day, according to the Sefat Emet, means every day.

Every day we are presented with choices. Do we wake up early enough to daven or do we sleep in? Do we wait the right amount of time between meat and dairy? With each choice we make a decision about who we are, and these choices determine who we will be.

But life is rarely so binary and rarely so clearly divided between good and evil. Too often we walk along a razor’s edge between what is seemingly good or bad, merciful or just. A double-edged sword of blessings and curses combined; they are not always separate and distinct. The world is an area of extreme nuance.

And sometimes in that gray—in those curses, if you will—we learn the most and do the most growing, as people, in our relationships with others, in our connection to God.

Dr. Wendy Mogel’s *The Blessing of the Skinned Knee* (2001) advocates for parents to step back a bit. Don’t run ahead and ensure your child’s path is clear and untroubled; don’t make their spaces too secure or their environments too easy. Let them fail. Let them fall because there is a blessing in the skinned knee. There is learning and growth in the pain, the cut, and the scab.

In blessing us with mitzvot and cursing us when we steer off course, God is not only giving us individual liberty. God is giving us the opportunity to grow. God is stepping back and allowing us to run ahead, to fall and raise back up again with new knowledge and understanding.

On this day—every day—we are faced with choices; sometimes the path is clear, what is right and what is wrong, but more often than not it isn’t. When you obey, you are blessed—meaning that observing the mitzvot is itself a blessing, a reward. If you don’t obey, you are cursed.

I believe these verses are saying that we are cursed not simply if we don’t obey—but if we don’t acknowledge, reflect upon, or grow from missteps. Mistakes ought to be opportunities to learn.

If we don’t learn from our sins, the inherent curse is stagnation. We won’t grow from the experience, become better people, improve our relationships, or get closer to God.

“See I have set before you this day a blessing and a curse.” We are given two choices—and they are not obey or sin, do good or bad—rather, they are the opportunity to do the mitzvot and the opportunity to learn from it if we don’t.

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