

THE BIGGEST POSSIBLE PRESENT

by Rabbi Label Lam

See I give to you **today** a blessing and a curse... (Devarim 11:26)

Of course the simple meaning is that there was a historical episode where a visual demonstration was displayed before the eyes of Israel and the images of blessing and curse were etched into the psyche of a nation. This was scripted as a teachable moment. Not only was it meant as a lesson then but it is equally applicable today. We say daily in our prayers, "Ki Hem Chayeinu"- "because they are our life" in reference to the words of Torah. Every word of Torah is therefore extemporaneous and aimed at us today, whenever today is.

The Sefas Emes writes in his quasi cryptic-poetic fashion, "See I give to you today...The explanation is that freedom of choosing is in the hands of man to opt for either good or bad. (Quoting his grandfather the Chidushei HaRim) "About this we make the blessing daily, 'who gives the rooster (man) the intelligence to discern between night and day.' The meaning of "today" is that man is granted renewed free choice every day. Because after Adam sinned free will was removed from the man as our sages stated, "the wicked are controlled by their heart". Even still the Holy One bless is He "renews the creation every day constantly" and He gives renewed -fresh free choice to man so that he can have the opportunity to express goodness again."

What does all this mean translated into useful English? The option to exercise free will is the greatest gift and the most uniquely Divine quality we humans possess. Unfortunately too much of what we do is relegated to inertia the forces of habit and our real power of free will is frustrated.

I observed a wondrous thing by a friend of mine who used to smoke three packs of cigarettes a day for almost two decades. One day, for some mystical reason, he decided and quit. Since then he never touched a cigarette. The next day and forever more he would have to find something else to do with his hands and mouth. I wondered how a person can pivot on a dime like that and make such a dramatic change.

I discovered where the Nefesh HaChaim quotes a Zohar explaining that accompanying a sincere decision is a holy power pack that gives the person the ability begin and drive into action. The volume of energy is in proportion to the size of the decision." When I began to contemplate the power of this dynamic I started to appreciate why we make such a big deal about weddings. Why is everyone so willing to cross the ocean or the George Washington Bridge? What justifies spending so much money on such a brief celebration? What is so compelling?

Simply put it's not just one person making a decision about one area of his life. It is two people making a commitment regarding everything. They are choosing to remain bound together forever. At that moment a huge fuel tank is granted that will enable them to remain constant and loyal for many decades in the face of millions of unforeseen variables: The economy, health, the in-laws, society around them, and the roller coaster ride called kids, testing "whether that nation or any nation so conceived and so dedicated may long endure." The enormity of the energy available at that moment is staggering. People intuitively come to bask in the afterglow of that event like the launching of a rocket ship.

Now even the grandest of weddings is merely a faint echo of an original event from 3329 years ago. We cannot fathom the enormous superhuman energy that was endowed when the entire Jewish Nation declared "in a singular voice saying; 'everything Hashem says we will do!'" (Shemos 24:3) That commitment unleashed and made available an enduring force that has allowed us to navigate the gauntlet of persecution "till the last syllable of recorded history".

Now, "See I give to you today a blessing and a curse". When we see clearly and appreciate the power of a pedestrian decision and that today-right now is a fresh opportunity to choose a new direction then we can become free immediately. That itself is the blessing. Not seeing that is the curse of remaining moored to past non-decisions and situations, to be stuck with the old. See I - "ANOCHI HASHEM" that we all heard thundering at Mount Sinai is giving you **the biggest possible present**.