

# NO MIDDLE ROAD

*by Shlomo Katz*

**Hamaayan / The Torah Spring  
Edited by Shlomo Katz**

**Re'eh  
Volume XVII, No. 45  
25 Av 5763  
August 23, 2003**

**Sponsored by Dr. and Mrs. Robert Klein in memory of father Dr. Ernst  
Shlomo Kaplowitz a"h**

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Today's Learning:

Kelim 23:2-3

O.C. 70:4-71:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Zevachim 75

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Shekalim 28

Parashat Re'eh always falls on or very close to Rosh Chodesh Elul, the beginning of the annual forty-day period when our teshuvah / repentance is particularly pleasing to Hashem.

Appropriately, our parashah begins with the verse, "Behold! I am placing before you today a blessing and a curse." As the verses which follow explain, this is the choice that we make when we choose to observe the mitzvot or to be lax in their performance.

We do not always realize that we are making such a choice.

Many commentators note that most people - even objective people - think of themselves as quite

righteous. R' Yosef Chaim Azulai ("Chida"; died 1806) relates that such a person said to Rambam (Maimonides), "I do not recite the vidui / confession found in the Yom Kippur Machzor, for to do so would be a lie."

Rambam responded, "If you truly understood the extent of your obligation to G-d, you would realize that you have committed every single sin listed there many times over." It is not that G-d is overly demanding, explains Chida, but simply that the more intelligent and understanding a person is, the more that is expected of him.

In this light, says Chida, we may understand the Gemara (Niddah 30) which teaches that before a child is born, he is made to take an oath: "Even if the entire world considers you to be a tzaddik, see yourself as a rasha / evildoer." Some explain that this is because one's soul is accountable for the sins that its "body" committed in prior incarnations. We may say more simply, however, that the greater a tzaddik one is, the more strictly he is judged. Therefore, he will always be found lacking by the yardstick that he creates for himself by his good deeds. (Lev David ch. 12).

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*"See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse." (11:26)*

R' Menachem Ben-Zion Sacks z"l (rosh yeshiva in Chicago; son-in-law of R' Zvi Pesach Frank z"l) writes: This verse teaches us unambiguously that there is no spiritual middle ground - there is a blessing and there is a curse, and nothing else. There are no spiritual vacuums in this world. If a person lets the spirit of G-d out of his heart, the spirit of the yetzer hara will fill his heart. The two goats offered on Yom Kippur symbolize this.

Man's lot is either with Hashem or with "azazel" (i.e., the forces of impurity). There is no middle road.

There is another lesson in this verse. The Torah does not say, "a blessing or a curse," but rather "a blessing and a curse." They are one and the same, for a blessing may easily become a curse. Halachah states that any blessing that does not include Hashem's Name is not a valid blessing. We may apply this halachah homiletically: any success that is accompanied by a belief in one's own power, rather than a belief in G-d, is not a blessing; it is a curse. This is what is referred to in Kohelet (5:12), "There is a sickening evil which I have seen under the sun -- riches hoarded by their owner to his misfortune." It is no coincidence, R' Sacks notes, that the word "shefa" / "munificence" has the same letters as "pesha" / "sin" and the word "oneg" / "pleasure" has the same letters as "nega" / "blemish." Munificence and pleasure can easily turn into a sin and a blemish. (Menachem Zion)

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*"See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing -- that you hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today. And the curse - - if you do not hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d . . ." (11:26-28)*

R' Raphael Baruch Sorotzkin z"l (1917-1979; Rosh Yeshiva of Telshe) observes that the Torah does not say, "if you hearken," the way it says, "if you do not hearken." Rather, the Torah says, "The blessing - that you hearken." That is itself the blessing. One who performs mitzvot will merit to perform additional mitzvot. This is a blessing because performing mitzvot elevates and refines a person. (Habinah V'habrachah)

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*"When a prophet will arise among you . . ." (13:2)*

The Gemara (Bava Batra 12a) teaches: "A wise man is greater than a prophet." R' Avraham son of the Rambam explains: The prophet referred to by this statement is not one of the prophets of the 24 books of Tanach, for they were all wise men and women in addition to being prophets, and they were certainly greater than someone who is only wise, but not a prophet. Rather, this statement refers to the many people mentioned in Tanach who experienced prophecy briefly, although they were not necessarily wise (see Shmuel I 19:20-21). Why is a wise man superior to them? Because he does not need them, but they do need him; without the wise man's wisdom and Torah knowledge, these "part-time" prophets would have no inkling of what is expected of them in this world. Such a prophet is even required to stand in the presence of a wise man, for there is no level higher than that of a Torah scholar. Knowledge of Torah is the ultimate purpose of creation, as Hashem told the prophet (Yirmiyahu 33:25), "If not for My covenant [being kept] day and night, I would not have created heaven and earth." For the same reason, even a king is required to have a Sefer Torah with him at all times. (Igrot R' Avraham ben Ha'Rambam, No. 7)

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*"You are children to Hashem, your G-d . . ." (14:1)*

R' Shalom Noach Brazovsky z"l (the Slonimer Rebbe; died 2000) writes: If a Jew had any inkling of his own worth, he would never sin. It was to convey this message that R' Avraham Weinberg z"l (1804-1884; the first Slonimer Rebbe) interpreted the verse (Mishlei 3:11), "Hashem's rebuke, my child, do not denigrate" - Hashem's rebuke is, "You are My child." Therefore, do not denigrate yourself. A Jew must remember that he is a prince, and that a prince is expected to behave in a certain way and not embarrass himself. One who appreciates his own worth will not, so-to-speak, sell his birthright for a mere bowl of stew.

R' Brazovsky continues: The legendary chassidic master, Reb Zusia, once heard an itinerant maggid / preacher deliver a fire- and-brimstone speech to a large assemblage of Jews. When the maggid finished, no one seemed to have been moved by his words. Then R' Zusia got up and said, "Dear brothers! Does not Hashem love you and care for you? How is it possible to transgress His will?" Immediately, heart-rending cries filled the synagogue. Afterward, the maggid asked R' Zusia, "Did I not portray in vivid detail the terrifying punishments of Gehinom? Why did that have no impact on them, while your words, which were not frightening at all, had an immediate effect on them?"

R' Zusia answered: "Your words had the effect of closing their hearts, scaring them until they could no longer feel. My words had the opposite effect."

The Gemara (Sotah 3a) says that a person does not sin unless a spirit of insanity comes over him. What this means, says R' Brazovsky, is that a person cannot sin unless he forgets who he is and how much he is worth. (Netivot Shalom: Kuntres B'chochmah Yivneh Bayit p.8)

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*"Give him, you shall give him, and let your heart not feel bad when you give him, for in return for this matter, Hashem, your God, will bless you in all your deeds and in your every undertaking." (15:10)*

R' Aharon Lewin z"l (rabbi of Rzeszow, Poland and member of the Polish parliament; killed in the Holocaust) writes: There are two attitudes that can lead one to give tzedakah / charity. One can feel sorry for the downtrodden pauper and give him charity as an expression of mercy. Such charity certainly is a worthy deed, but it is not the highest form of tzedakah. The highest form of charity is to give because it is a mitzvah; it is G-d's Will and His commandment to us.

R' Lewin notes that R' Yosef Albo z"l (author of Sefer Ha'ikkarim; 1380-1444) uses the above idea to explain the verse (Yishayah 32:17): "The product [literally, 'deed'] of charity shall be peace; and the effect [literally, 'service'] of charity -- quiet and security forever." The deed of giving charity, no matter why it is done, brings peace to the one who does it. However, the service of tzedakah, giving charity because it is a form of service to G-d, is far greater. Such tzedakah brings the doer quiet and security forever.

R' Lewin continues (citing his grandfather, R' Yitzchak Shmelkes z"l): One advantage of giving tzedakah because it is a mitzvah rather than because one feels pity is that the feeling of pity wears off eventually. Moreover, when we see that poverty is widespread, we become insensitive to it. Not so if one gives charity to fulfill the Will of G-d. That Will is unchanging, and so one's charity will be unending. This is the teaching of our verse: "Give him, you shall give him." Say Chazal: You shall give to a pauper repeatedly, even a hundred times. How can you train yourself to do this? "Let your heart not feel bad when you give him" - don't give because you feel bad, but because G-d commanded it. (Hadrash Ve'ha'iyun)

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## Letters from Our Sages

The following letter was written by R' Shimshon David Pinkus z"l (rabbi of Ofakim, Israel; died 2001) in response to a question from a yeshiva student. R' Pinkus' response contains a message for every person who is concerned with his or her own spiritual growth.

To a beloved young man who is unknown to me, shlita: I read your letter, and although I am not competent to offer advice or tell you what to do, I will write what appears to be correct in my

humble opinion. First, I will summarize what you wrote.

It appears that you are striving mightily to grow in Torah study and fear of Heaven. You are doing all that you can, and have, in fact, already expended all of the effort that is expected of you. Now you are at a stage where you need assistance from the outside. The reason for this is simply that your goals are so lofty and awesome, namely, you aspire to attain Torah and to develop an inner drive to continue your growth. Attaining these goals is simply above man's capabilities, and although man certainly is required to make an effort, a time comes when outside assistance must be sought.

Therefore, I will give you a name and address to which you should turn, and there you will find assistance.

His name is "Hashem."

He is very powerful, for He created everything. I have inside information that He has a great love for you personally, and He is pining away for your call.

You will have no trouble finding His address, for He is everywhere --literally. Even this minute, as you are reading this letter, you can turn to Him.

I write this because many people believe that G-d is found only through prayer, mitzvot and special regimens for spiritual growth. Of course, He is in all of those "places," but those are not the primary places to find Him. The main thing to know is that G-d is a real and living being with whom it is possible to form a personal relationship. No one who has tried this has ever been disappointed.

This is so simple and practical and therefore so beneficial.

The key is to have a simple personal connection in which you tell Him your problems and ask Him again and again to help you. If someone gives you different advice, it will be a pity on the effort that you expend following it. Go straight to the One who can really help, grab hold of Him and do not let go. Do not be silent until you have attained whatever you desire.

Signed with great respect for a ben Torah who is truly seeking, but unfortunately does not know where to look,

[Rabbi] Shimshon David Pinkus

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ("lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah"), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Project Genesis](#) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page. Text archives from 1990 through the present may be retrieved from <http://www.acoast.com/~sehc/hamaayan/>. Donations

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