

# THE INDIVIDUAL AND THE NATION

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

*"Behold, I place before you this day, blessing and curse. The blessing, that you will listen to the Commandments of HaShem your G-d, which I command you today; and the curse, if you will not listen to the commands of HaShem your G-d, and you turn away from the path which I command you today, to go after other gods which you have not known." [11:26-28]*

The word "re'eh," meaning "see" or "behold," is given in the singular, whereas "lifneichem," "before you," is said in the plural.

The Chasam Sofer explains that this verse hints to a saying of our Sages (Talmud Kiddushin 40): a person should always view the world as if it is half good and half bad, or half meritorious and half lacking. If he does even one Mitzvah, then he tilts the scales and the entire world is found meritorious; but if he commits even one transgression, then he tilts them the other way, and the entire world is found lacking.

Therefore the verse tells each and every individual: see (in your mind) that I am placing the entire world in front of you, blessing and curse, and you control the scales...

People tend to view themselves only as individuals, and often resent interference from others. But there is a famous parable (offered by the Kli Yakar in his commentary to the verse "and you shall surely rebuke your nation," Leviticus 19:17) about a group of people traveling in a boat. One takes out a drill, and he begins to make a hole in the boat beneath his seat. When the other passengers protest, he responds "why is this your business? I'm making a hole beneath my seat! Leave me alone!" But when the water comes in, everyone will sink.

The Chasam Sofer drives home the idea that we are all interconnected. Yes, we are all responsible as individuals for our own actions, but we must also realize that everything we do affects those around us. If we think about this, obviously we will choose to do good!

We see that good is indeed "obvious" in the verses which follow. Concerning the blessing, the verse says "that you will listen," but the next verse reads "if you will not listen" in connection with the curse. It is obvious that we will listen! Every Jew, at some point, hears the message! Even those who often don't are still doing something unnatural. It's never a second-nature "that you don't listen," but a temporary "if."

Rabbi Shimshon Rephael Hirsch explains that the verse is telling us something else as well: the blessing is that you will listen. The blessing doesn't merely follow the Mitzvah - the Mitzvah is a blessing which is realized immediately. Every time we do a Mitzvah, our entire being takes a step forward, and we bless ourselves through every good deed.

Text Copyright © 1997 Rabbi Yaakov Menken and Project Genesis, Inc.

The author is the Director of Project Genesis.