

BLESSINGS AND CURSES

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

In this week's reading, G-d promises His blessings if we follow in His ways, and, may we see no more, curses if we do not.

Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra questions why the curses are so much longer than the blessings. There are eleven verses of blessing, while the section of curses is three times as long. This is strange, especially because we find throughout Jewish thought that G-d's attribute of goodness is stronger than any attribute of punishment.

The Tosefes Bracha provides an insightful answer. The good must be said briefly, he says, because if anything is missing from it, then it is no longer so good. Meaning, if a person is wealthy he is in a "good" situation, but if he is ill you can no longer call his situation "good." If he has both wealth and health, but has not been blessed with children, than once again his circumstances are no longer entirely "good." And if he has children, but they are rebellious and have nothing to do with him, again it's not good. So whenever "good" is specified, it must be fulfilled in its entirety.

When it comes to misfortune, just the opposite is true. Even a single misfortune is bad, and piling one upon another simply makes matters worse. If an impoverished person is also sick, his misfortune is still greater than if he suffered only one or the other.

So this is the reason, says the Tosefes Bracha, that the blessings are stated briefly: for if there is any deviation from them, then the blessing is defective and not truly good. When any type of blessing is specified, there is an expectation that it will be fulfilled -- and if it is not, then the person feels the lack of that particular type of blessing, and the "good" is missing. But on the negative side, one bad thing can be piled upon the other without limit, and thus the curses can be stated at length.

The truth of the matter is that no one is entirely blessed in this world. There isn't a person on the planet who has nothing to worry about.

This being the case, a person cannot escape from worry by building a successful business, exercising daily, or by consulting the best of psychotherapists. The only thing one can do is develop trust in G-d. Religion is hardly an "opiate" -- but a religious outlook is necessary for true satisfaction to be possible.

One of the most fundamental concepts in Jewish thought is that G-d cares about each individual, and creates a situation for him or her which is in fact ideal -- not ideal as in relaxed or free from

worries, but ideal for spiritual growth. This is true no matter how it might appear to our eyes, and therefore our situation is "good" after all. Whatever the test is, we can pass it and grow in the process.

The only thing we must do, then, is realize that this is true. Spiritual giants are capable of suffering even the worst of situations with a smile and true satisfaction with their station in life. That is a treasure worth far more than a vault full of diamonds -- and one which all of us can hope to unearth within ourselves!

Good Shabbos,

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