

... OF COURSE

by Rabbi Label Lam

See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing, that you will heed the commandments of HASHEM your G-d, which I command you today; and the curse, if you will not hearken to the commandments of HASHEM your G-d, but turn away from the way I command you this day, to follow other gods, which you did not know. **(Devarim 1:26-28)**

...if you will not heed the commandments of HASHEM your G-d, but turn away from the way I command you this day, to follow other gods, which you did not know: This teaches that whoever worships idols departs from the entire path that Israel has been commanded. From here four Sages said: One who grants legitimacy to idolatry is as though he denies the entire Torah. — Rashi

This whole business of idolatry can be a bit puzzling. There is a loving tolerant voice inside that may just be wondering quietly, "What's so bad?" Here a person has a longing for spirituality but they are a little misguided and mistaken in how to go about the business of expressing their spirituality. What's so bad? Why is it considered as if they are in denial of the entire Torah? This severe approach may awaken another voice, a cynical tone which says, "How insecure and fragile a system must be that it coerces adherents to remain loyal with threats of curses."

There is a basic assumption that gives life to both of those voices and that premise is faulty. If the purpose of serving HASHEM and only HASHEM is solely for the benefit of HASHEM then we have wrongly pictured HASHEM as the cruel dictator of North Korea that must throttle and intimidate his flock into a state of allegiance. It's actually the other way around. This is no scare tactic! We live in a cause and effect universe. We are being told for our benefit how to access the true blessing in life and how to avoid the cursed path.

Following idolatry is like hurrying down the wrong highway, imagining foolishly the whole time we are getting closer to our destination. Deviation from good instruction leads to ultimate disappointment. It may feel spiritual but it's false and it dead ends!

Call that that result, on any scale, "cursed". It's more advisable that we preset our minds to follow sagely Torah advice when it is given, and continually draw closer to the ultimate goal with certitude. That's call "blessed".

Within the first few months of marriage our car broke down and we needed a replacement, nothing fancy. My wife and I found our way to a kindly old man who showed us a ten year old car with less than 50,000 miles. It seemed in good enough shape.

Before going deep pocket to purchase it, I decided to consult my Rebbe. He asked me point blank, "Did you drive it?" I told him, "No! The man would not allow me. He didn't have the right paper-work. He drove it around for us and it felt fine!" The Rebbe told me, "If he didn't let you drive it, don't buy it! Something's wrong! I have an explicit Rashi in Chumash Devarim that says "watch out!"

I bought the car anyway. Everything seemed OK- that is until I started to drive it home. On that maiden voyage in the "new" car I began to notice how poorly it handled. I thought I was dragging a dead deer. It felt much older than the mileage indicated.

When I looked at odometer to check I noticed something remarkable. The numbers were rolling backwards. The car was getting younger! Amazing! It became obvious through closer inspection that the glass cover had been removed and the odometer had been tampered with, which is a federal crime.

I went back to my Rebbe to ask him what I was to do. I'll never forget that incredulous look and tone. "You bought the car!?" He told me to write it off as "Rebbishe Gelt" -money spent on learning a serious life lesson.

It's a longer story. We did get the money back but not without aggravation. With the benefit of hindsight, so many years later, we realize that it was a relatively inexpensive course we were treated to in learning the important life lesson to follow instructions and to stay on course to avoid the curse... **of course.**