

A BLESSING AND A CURSE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

See, I place before you this day blessing and curse. The blessing is for listening to the commandments of God, your God, which I command you today. The curse is for not listening to the commandments of God, your God, and for turning away from the way which I command you today, and going after foreign gods which you did not know. (Devarim 11:26-28)

It seems like a no-brainer. Who in their right mind would want to go against God, and lose everything? No one. Hence, the Talmud writes: A person does not sin unless a spirit of insanity enters him. (Sotah 3a) However, if it is so insane to sin, why are the shuls packed on Yom Kippur? They are supposed to be synagogues, not sanitariums. And, judging by the sincerity of the people who pray around me, they take the viduy — the confessional prayer — quite seriously, as if they truly have what to atone for.

I certainly do, and I seem to function somewhat normally on a day-to-day basis. At least I think I do ...I remember once being at the check-in counter of an airport when a man, in line ahead of me, lost his temper at the airline employee behind the counter. Obviously, something had not gone with his reservation, and extremely disappointed, he gave the airline employee a piece of his mind, and loud enough for all of us to share. It was embarrassing for all those who could hear what was happening. If I recall correctly, the man stormed off, seemingly oblivious to what he had done, and who had heard him. The look of anger on his face was scary, even maniacal, and I think we all felt a sigh of relief once he was gone from the area. I, for one, certainly hoped that he would not return until I was long gone.

After checking in rather smoothly, and sitting down by my gate, the events that had just transpired went through my mind. The face of the man was still quite fresh in my mind, and I wondered what he would have done had he seen his own face in a mirror at that time. I recall once catching my own angry face in a mirror, and quite frankly, I scared myself! Then, I tried to imagine what the angry man must be like to work with, but realized that, just because he lost his temper at the airline employee, doesn't mean that he always loses his temper, and with everyone. There are some people who are completely patient at work with their fellow employees, but monsters at home with their families. Others are just the opposite, so I wondered what people might possibly tell me about this man. Maybe at work he was completely pleasant and dependable. Maybe he had just had a bad day.

At that point, I then considered myself. I wondered about my own snapping points, what it takes for me to "lose it," which I have done on too many occasions. And that, in spite of the fact that I am

familiar with the Talmud's warning that losing one's temper is like worshipping idols (Shabbos 105b), of that it is bad for memory (Pesachim 66b). What were we just talking about again?

Then, I considered how many times I have knowingly broken the Torah. Not willingly broken the Torah, for I would never want to rebel against God, God forbid. But, I pondered, how many times have I done something that I "sensed" the Torah probably does not permit, but did it anyways, as if compelled by some outside force? In other words, how many times have I watched myself fall prey to my yetzer hara, and been just too weak, for one reason or another, to do anything about it, acting at that moment instead like someone out of step with reality?

The Talmud makes an interesting statement that applies to our discussion here. It says: *Woe to those who see, but know not what they see!* (Chagigah 12b) It is talking about people who do not appreciate Creation for what it actually is. They may enjoy it, be fascinated by it, and even admire it, but they don't understand it as the handiwork of God in all its Kabbalistic glory. They deal with Creation as a 10-year might handle an expensive glass vase:

Mother: "Hey, be careful with that! That's an expensive vase!"

Son: "How much could it possibly have cost?"

Mother: "More than you can afford to pay to replace it!"

Son: "How could something be so expensive, who would be so silly to spend that kind of money on such a simple thing?!"

At the age of 10, a child does not appreciate all the intricate craftsmanship involved in producing such a beautiful vase, or how it becomes a work of art because of it. The child only sees a vase, a different type than he is used to, but a vase nevertheless. His lack of ability to see what went into producing the sculpted glass limits his ability to see it as it is.

To appreciate any situation in life, and to respond to it on the proper level, we must understand what went into making it. Hence, the rabbis teach:

The world was created in 10 utterances. What does this come to teach us? Could not the world have been created in a single utterance? It was in order to exact punishment from the wicked who destroy the world which was created in 10 utterances, and to give reward to the righteous who sustain the world which was created in 10 utterances. (Pirkei Avos 5:1)

Do not think that this teaching only refers to Creation itself. For, it refers to all that exists within Creation, including every moment and opportunity of life. When a person walks up to you and annoys you in some way, seemingly for no reason, you have a choice. You can see the moment as simple and random, meaningless by virtue of the fact that it was not planned and seemingly, has little to offer you in terms of enhancing your life. Or, you can see it, in spite of its apparent simplicity, as having been orchestrated by God Himself.

To the extent that you do, you are sane, for, to the extent that you do is the extent to which you see reality as God does. Life is one big Divine conspiracy during which people and events rarely seem on the surface what they actually are inside. This way we can be rewarded for making the decision to get to the bottom of things, of people, of events, and of life itself.

And, quite amazingly, once we do, we are often surprised by how different our "acquired" perception is from the one we were given for free at the start.

Returning to the angry man at the airport, clearly he acted as if he was betrayed by the airline employee behind the counter, though she had only been doing her job. Did the airlines betray him? It sure seemed like that to the man. However, more likely he was the victim of an innocent mistake, or of a policy decision with which the man himself would agree if he was on the board of the airlines. However, one thing was for certain: no one had been out to deliberately "get" him.

What about the man himself? A maniac of a person? Unlikely. Disappointed? Understandably so. Justified in acting in such a rude and harsh way to another human being, especially in public? Certainly not, especially since the employee had remained polite and helpful, as much as she could be at that time, until the end. So, then, what went wrong? Imagine if, in the midst of the argument, a booming voice yelled down:

"It's not her fault! I arranged the entire episode!" to which the man angrily responds:

"Is that so? Well, then, who are you? The manager? The owner of the airline?"

"You could say that," the voice continues.

Turning to the person behind the counter, the man impatiently asks, "Okay, which speaker phone is he talking through?"

"Ah, sir ..." the confused employee stutters. "There is no speaker phone here ..."

"Don't you lie to me!" the man shouts. "Everyone can hear that voice on the speaker ... phone ..." the man trails off, as he sees the phone still in its cradle, and no light showing the line in use.

"Hey, is this some kind of trick?" the man asks, now confused.

"No, this is God speaking ..." the voice now says.

"Right," the man says sarcastically. "Well, that's the problem with you airline owners! You all think you're God! Well, let me just tell you ..." he tries to say, before the voice interrupts him.

"No, this really is God, as in the Creator of the Universe!" at which point the man goes white in the face, realizing that the voice is coming from the thin air, and beyond. "I am the One who caused this mistake, for reasons you won't be able to fathom until years from now. This was set in motion 10 years ago, by a series of incidents that you don't even remember. This is part of a rectification for mistakes made even in your previous lifetimes."

There is a pause, as Heaven gives the man time to absorb what has been said. Then it continues:

"In fact, the employee at whom you are yelling was specifically chosen to be on duty today for you, just for this test, and everyone around you was brought here today to be a part of all of this. In fact, would you like to know what went in to arranging the airport just so for this moment and test, indeed to arrange your entire life just to have this opportunity present itself?"

Incredulous, and pale in the face, the man sits down on his suitcase, and puts his face in his hands, while everyone else around him just stands there, stunned, by the miraculous revelation of God's hand in everyday life.

Can anyone be the same after such an experience, or yell at another person again? And, the amazing thing is, as far-fetched as this scenario may seem, the only far-fetched part of it was the booming Heavenly voice. All the rest of it is true all the time, and you have to ask yourself, "How different would my life be if I could see it that way?"

Hence, the most important word in this week's parshah is the one we're least likely to pay attention to: see. Moshe Rabbeinu doesn't just speak about mitzvos and sins, blessings and curses. He starts off by saying "see," as if to say, "If you can't see reality properly, then you'll get confused about life, and end up pursuing that which brings curse, not blessing, while you think you are doing just the opposite."

Hence, the rabbis teach: *The secrets of God to those who fear Him*. (Niddah 20b)

As we have said on many occasions before, the Hebrew word for "fear" is the same word as the word for "see." For, those who can "see" God in every aspect of life will be privy to information that others are blind to, though it may stare them right in the face. It's amazing what information surfaces, and makes a difference to our choices and responses, when we get to the bottom of life.

And, with such "secrets" comes the necessary understanding to get the blessing out of life intended for us, and to avoid the curses we are expected to avoid. And, who in their right would want to be able to that?

Text

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