



**Partners In Torah**

**San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura**

**Take home Dvar Torah**

**תשפ"ד Parshat Re'eh**

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***Hello, Welcome!***

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide, independent and inclusive adult education program focusing on understanding Jewish relevancy to our lives by studying text most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour each week, friendships are forged between mentors and mentees.**

***Partners in Torah has proven to be effective at reclaiming the rich legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and guidance for many who have, until now, lacked access.***

***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in participating so that we may grow together as a community.**

This week's portion *ראה* starts with a bang. Moshe tells the Jewish people in the name of Hashem (Deuteronomy 11:26):

**כֹּה רָאָה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה**

*26) Look! I am placing before you today blessing and curse!*

Rabbi Ovadia Seforno (1480-1550) applies a novel approach to interpreting this verse:

כֹּה רָאָה. הַבֵּיטָה וְרָאָה שֶׁלֹּא יִהְיֶה עֲנִינְךָ עַל אֹפֶן בִּינֹנִי כִּמוֹ שֶׁהוּא הַמְנַהֵג בְּרוּב. כִּי אֲמַנֵּם אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה וְהֵם שְׁנֵי הַקְּצוּוֹת, כִּי הַבְּרָכָה הִיא הַצְּלַחָה יוֹתֵר מִן הַמְּסַפִּיק ע"צ הַיּוֹתֵר טוֹב. וְהַקְּלָלָה הִיא מֵאֲרָה מַחְסֶרֶת שֶׁלֹּא יוֹשֵׁג הַמְּסַפִּיק, וְשֵׁנִיהֶם לְפָנֵיכֶם לְהַשִּׁיג כְּפִי מֵה שֶׁתִּבְחָרוּ

*Look carefully and see to it that your matters aren't mediocre like most people's. I place before you blessing and curse, the two extremes. Blessing is when you succeed in achieving more than you need to and do the most possible. A curse is when you fall short of the mark and are unable to achieve what you need to achieve. I place them both before you to succeed based on your choices.*

This Sforno reminds me of a feature article that *National Geographic* once did on Jon Krakauer, an ice-climber.

Ice climbers are the ones who make mountain climbers look like toddlers in diapers. Instead of climbing a mountain with rocks and footholds to climb on, they climb up vertical mountains of ice, like a ten-story frozen waterfall. The sport is dangerous, difficult and exhausting. Conditions are usually miserable; frigid, damp and stormy. Even the gear looks scary. Ice axes for each hand, and spiked crampons for the feet. A skillful climber, Krakauer describes what it feels like to hang by the straps of one's ice axes a hundred feet above

the ground his attachment to the world reduced to “a few thin points of steel sunk a half an inch into a giant popsicle”

He explained why he does it. “The view releases a surge of brain chemicals that blows the rust from my cerebral pipes. Pay attention! I tell myself aloud. This is serious! One false move and you are history! This explains why paradoxically I feel more alive than I have in a month.” ‘Ice climbing restores the primal hues that have been bleached from the canvas of civilized existence,’ he writes. ‘It lends one’s actions an immediacy, a delicious gravity, a **seriousness that is sorely lacking from workaday life**. What you do on the side of a waterfall matters!’

On the side of a vertical mountain of ice, it’s either all or nothing. If you don’t give it your all, you are history. This is why Jon Krakauer is prepared to endanger his life; to feel the importance of doing something perfectly, instead just getting away with mediocrity like most people. Although this may sound weird, putting himself in danger gives him a greater appreciation for life, and this adds meaning to his life.

The Seforno is teaching us that blessing obtains when you put yourself out to achieve the maximum you can in life. Living life with a goal to accomplish and achieve as much as possible, gives one purpose and great meaning in life. Living life this way is the greatest blessing, for such a life is rich and filled with meaning. Don’t be like most people who are content with a mediocre standard for themselves and do just the minimum they need to get by. That is a curse like falling off the mountain. Choose to have blessing by doing the best that you can in everything.

We must ask ourselves: to what should a person apply his efforts to achieve excellence? Climbing a hundred-foot popsicle?

The Torah reveals the answer in the next two verses.

(כז) אֶת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת יְדֹד אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

*27) The blessing is when you will listen to Hashem's commandments.*

(כח) וְהַקְּלָלָה אִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת יְדֹד אֱלֹהֵיכֶם

*28) And the curse will come if you don't listen to Hashem's commandments.*

Clear enough. But how are we to understand these statements? Yes, our Creator, Who knows best what is good for us, announced these principles; but are we able to understand how this is so? That the only blessing in the world is to keep Hashem's commandments? Nothing else?

The Torah teaches us that for a Jew, every aspect of life can be infused with blessing. Our Sages teach us that in Judaism, there are no optional or neutral choices. Either there is a mitzvah to do it and a sin not to, or there is a sin if you do it, and a mitzvah not to. *As the Chovot Halevavot explains, there is no such thing as an optional matter.*

כי אין דבר בעולם שלא יהיה מצוה או עבירה, ואין לך דבר רשות בעולם, כמו שכתוב  
בחובת הלבבות (שער עבודת האלקים פ"ד) עיין שם

*There is nothing in the world that isn't either a mitzvah or a sin.*

Therefore, no matter what a person does, in any area of life, if he does so with the intention to fulfill one of Hashem's commandments, the act becomes a mitzvah. Having a vocation and earning money fulfills the mitzvah of supporting oneself and his family so that he is able to live to perform mitzvot. It also opens the door for many other mitzvot, such as giving charity and helping others. No matter what job

one has, if done with honesty and integrity, the mitzvah of “Do not steal” is fulfilled, and, with that, he is also sanctifying Hashem’s name. Even life’s necessities, such as eating and sleeping, can be transformed into a *mitzvah* when done to have strength to serve Hashem or to study His Torah.

In every situation, though, when one wishes to fulfill a mitzvah, he runs into a counterforce, viz, the יצר הרע (Yetzer hara – evil inclination) that opposes him and makes it difficult to execute the mitzvah. One must nevertheless muster all his effort to overcome the strong tendency to just take a pass on the opportunity and sit it out. Yet, one’s success in meeting the challenge and performing the mitzvah imbues him with the holiness of the mitzvah, transforming him into a holier person.

This is what the Seforno means. When one pushes himself and overcomes the tendency to be complacent and settle for the mediocre, he will experience the greatest blessing, because growth and accomplishment bring meaning to life. Considering this, we easily see how life can be full of blessing. Every mitzvah is a blessing, and the loss of a mitzvah, or a sin, becomes a curse.

Because this bonanza of blessing is applicable only to the Jewish people, Judaism raises the stakes of existence in this world. The ice climber intentionally raises his stakes to put meaning into his life, not only from the dangerous height of the frozen waterfall, but also because a fall means certain death.

A Jew, however, needs only to pursue every mitzvah opportunity to receive blessing upon blessing from Hashem. Not only will this bring *him* the greatest blessing and satisfaction, he will also be a source of blessing to the entire world. How is that?

Many of the Torah's commentaries point out an inconsistency in our parasha's first verse, which begins with the word ראה - see -in the singular, and then shifts into the plural form לפניכם -in front of you. Why the mid-sentence switch?

To answer, they point to the Talmud Tractate Kiddushin 40b, which says:

ר' אלעזר בר' שמעון אומר, לפי שהעולם נידון אחר רובו והיחיד נידון אחר רובו עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף זכות עבר עבירה אחת אוי לו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם לכף חובה

*Rabbi Eliezer the son of Rabbi Shimon said: The world is judged based on the majority (righteous and evil people) and so is the individual. If he did one mitzvah, how fortunate he is to have tilted himself and the whole world to the side of merit; and if he did one sin, woe unto him for having tilted himself and the world to the side of evil.*

One who has more mitzvot than sins (even one!) is deemed righteous, and one who has more sins than mitzvot is deemed evil. Our Sages teach us that one should not consider himself neither righteous nor evil. Rather, he should always think of himself as right in the middle with an equal number of mitzvot and sins. With this mindset, he will always opt to do another mitzvah, for this will be the mitzvah that puts him into the category of the righteous, and he will always opt to refrain from a sin, lest it cast him into the category of an evil person.

Rashi explains that since the world and the individual are judged by the majority of their actions, doing just one more mitzvah will not only make him a righteous person, but it will tip the world's scale in favor of the righteous. Just that one mitzvah can save the world! This idea brings great importance to every person and to every one of his actions. One can never know how great the ramifications of his simple

mitzvah are. At the very least, he can be assured that his good deed is not going wasted. It will add both to his status and to the status of the world. One need not climb a popsicle to feel importance in his actions.

This is why the verse accordingly begins in the singular and continues in the plural, to teach us that the whole world could be dependent on a single act of just one person.

There is another hint to this idea. In Deuteronomy (27:11) Moshe gives the instructions as to how the blessings and curses mentioned in this week's portion are to be delivered.

(יא) וַיִּצַו מֹשֶׁה אֶת הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא לֵאמֹר:  
(יב) אֱלֹהֵי יַעֲמֹדוּ לְבָרֵךְ אֶת הָעָם עַל הַר גְּרִזִים בְּעֶבְרַתְכֶם אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן שְׁמֹעוּן וְלוֹי:  
וַיְהִי־הָיָה וַיִּשְׁשַׁכֶּר וַיִּוֹסֶף וּבְנֵי־מִן  
(יג) וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲמֹדוּ עַל הַקְּלָלָה בְּהַר עֵיבָל רְאוּבֵן גָּד וְאַשֶׁר וְזִבּוּלֹן דָּן וְנַפְתָּלִי  
11) *And Moshe commanded the nation on that day, saying. 12) These shall stand on Mount Grizim to bless the nation when you traverse the Jordan River, Shimon, Levi, Yehuda, Yissachar, Yosef and Binyamin. 13) And these shall stand for the curses on Mount Eval, Reuvein, Gad, Asher, Zevulun, Dan and Naftaly.*

Rashi explains that the six tribes were to ascend *Mount Eval* and the remaining six would ascend *Mount Grizim*. The *Cohanim* and the *Leviim* with the Holy Ark were to stand in the valley between the two mountains and proclaim the blessings and curses. First, they would turn their faces to *Mount Grizim* and state the blessing to the six tribes on that mountain, and then they would face the six tribes on *Mount Eval* and state the curse to them.

Rabbi Yisrael Salanter (d. 1883) explains that this configuration was intended to evoke the image of a scale, the two mountains representing the two balance pans. Although all twelve tribes were



righteous, the idea of one side receiving a blessing and the other receiving a curse was intended to provoke the thought that it is as if one half of the nation is righteous, keeping the Torah and worthy of receiving a blessing, and the other isn't keeping the Torah and is worthy of a curse. Seeing this would bring to mind the Talmud's lesson that the world hangs in a balance, with the responsibility of each individual to see himself as the one who will tilt the scale in one of the two directions, based on his next action. This brings one to realize just how delicate the balance in the world is, and that even one of his mitzvot can affect the entire world by tipping the scale in favor of the good or bad.

The message of the scale is very appropriate for this time of year. The portion of Re'eh always comes near the beginning of the month of Elul. Next Tuesday will be ראש חודש אלול, the first day of the month of Elul, the month in which we prepare for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. The representative constellation for the month of Tishrei, the month in which Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur fall, is, indeed, the scale. It is the month of judgment. It is therefore appropriate to think about the scale-implying judgment-during the month of Elul before the upcoming High Holidays.

Why, does it seem, that most people are satisfied with mediocrity? What prevents them from striving for and achieving excellence? Our Sages teach us that, for the most part, it is simple laziness.

Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato (d. 1746 at age 39) says it very clearly in his work *The Path of the Just*, chapter 6.

ותראה כי טבע האדם כבד מאד, כי עפריות החמריות גס, על כן לא יחפוץ האדם  
בטורח ומלאכה

*You will see that man's nature of is to feel very heavy because the earthiness of his material makeup is coarse. Therefore, man disdains toil and work.*

This is also why man is so reluctant to accept responsibility upon himself and will do anything to escape it. Responsibility means *obligation* to others and places limitations on free time. What is the secret to escaping mediocrity's curse and achieving blessing?

The Midrash provides a clue:

ילקוט שמעוני דברים - פרק יא - רמז תתעה

משל לאדם שהיה יושב על פרשת הדרכים והיו לפניו שני שבילין, אחד שתחלתו מישור וסופו קוצים ואחד שתחלתו קוצים וסופו מישור, והיה מודיע את העוברים ואת השבים ואמר להם שאתם רואים שביל זה שתחלתו מישור כשתים ושלש פסיעות מהלך במישור וסופו לצאת לקוצים ואתם רואים את שביל זה שתחלתו קוצים כשתים ושלש פסיעות אתה מהלך בקוצים וסופו לצאת למישור

*This could be compared to a man sitting at a fork in the road with two paths: One is clear in the beginning but after a short while contains thorns and thistles and is very difficult to pass, and the other has thorns and thistles in the beginning but, after a short while, opens up to a clear path. He would tell the travelers, "You see this road with a clear path? After just two or three steps it will be filled with thorns and thistles. And you see this path with the thorns and thistles? After just two or three steps it will open up to a clear road."*

כך אמר להן משה לישראל אתם רואים את הרשעים שהן מצליחים בשנים ושלשה ימים הן מצליחין בעוה"ז וסופן לדחות באחרונה... ואתם רואים צדיקים שמצטערין בעולם הזה כשנים ושלשה ימים הן מצטערים וסופן לשמוח באחרונה שנאמר להטיבך באחריתך

*This is what Moshe told the Jewish people, “You see the evil people prosper for a couple days in this world, but in the end (in the eternal World to Come) they will be pushed aside. And you see righteous people who suffer in this world a few days and they are having a rough time, but it is so that they will rejoice in the end (in the eternal World to Come).”*

Moshe tells the Jewish people (Deuteronomy 30:19):

(יט) הַעֲדוֹתֵי בְכֶם הַיּוֹם אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ הַחַיִּים וְהַמּוֹת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ  
הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה וּבְחִרְתָּ בַחַיִּים לְמַעַן תַּחְיֶה אֶתְּךָ וְזַרְעֲךָ

*19) I call heaven and earth today to bear witness against you: I have placed **life** and death before you, **blessing** and curse; **and you shall choose life**, so that you will live, you and your offspring.*

The commentaries explain that the life referred to here is the eternal life of the World to Come. Yes, the pursuit of excellence and bracha takes much effort. One needs to overcome the natural feeling of laziness and heaviness, the thorns and thistles, which, unfortunately, is the human’s default position. But, after a short while, after putting forth effort, it will become second nature, and the path to excellence will become easier. As *The Path of the Just*, chapter 9, informs us.

וכשירגיל עצמו על זה הדרך, ימצא העבודה קלה עליו ודאי

*When he accustomed himself to it, he will find the work much easier for him.*

It’s like the expression, “If you want to get something done, ask a busy person.” The logic is that he is already in motion and requires only a small detour to fulfill your request. Whereas a lazy person, just his getting up is a whole ordeal, and, therefore, it takes much more effort on his part and accordingly most likely it won’t get done.

On the other hand, the “easy road,” just doing nothing, starts easy, but in the end, when a person reaches the end of his life, that life has only thorns and thistles because he didn’t put himself out to accomplish anything. Even worse, in the World to Come, he will be destitute without good deeds to show for himself.

As we begin the month of Elul, let’s focus on bringing as much blessing into our lives as possible. This will enrich our lives and those of the Jewish people as a whole and will help us prepare for the upcoming High Holidays. Sure, it takes some effort and focus, but the rewards are immeasurable.