

See, I present before you... a blessing and a curse. The blessing: that you listen... and the curse if you do not listen. (11:26,27,28)

Parashas Re'eh opens with an enjoinder to "see" both blessing and curse. "Seeing" here means intellectual perception, since blessing and curse are not entities which can be observed by corporeal eyes. It requires intelligence to comprehend, distinguish and acknowledge that, indeed, those who are Torah observant Jews are blessed, fulfilled, feel a sense of achievement and spiritual growth. It takes a fool to disregard and purposely overlook the vacuousness and almost daily crises that plague those who have chosen a lifestyle that caters to the fulfillment of materialistic and physical needs and desires. One who pursues the pleasures of the flesh is never satisfied. He always wants more; "more" is defined by how much his neighbor has, because envy is intrinsic to his life. Therefore, *brachah* and *kelalah* are not necessarily terms relating to Heavenly reward descending on many, but rather, definitions of a lifestyle to which people adhere – either by choice or by default.

The Torah teaches that *brachah*, blessing, is the result of committing oneself to carrying out the *ratzon*, will, of G-d. Blessing is the direct consequence of a life of serving Hashem. In contrast, one who does not listen to Hashem's decree will end up wallowing in the self-imposed curses that structure his lifestyle.

The Torah, therefore, instructs us to see for ourselves the lifestyle of those who adhere to the Torah way and, in contrast, to view with pity the way of life of those who lead a life without Torah. Now, the question arises: Who says so? Who says that those who have chosen a life without Torah are not happy, are not blessed? Since when do we have the monopoly on defining the meaning of success, pleasure, happiness? We might pat ourselves on the back and claim that "they" are not happy, but, if we were to ask "them," they would think that we need to have our heads examined. They certainly project themselves as being filled with joy – often much more so than we do.

A serious problem prevalent is in the homes of some who are committed Torah Jews: They do not believe they are living a life of blessing, and even those who have "convinced" themselves of this reality have yet to succeed in imbuing this feeling into the psyche of their children. In order to inspire others, one must himself be a strong believer. He must sincerely believe that his life is truly a happy one. How does one accomplish this?

I take the liberty of excerpting a free translation of a letter which **Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, zl**, the *Michtav MeiEliyahu*, wrote in 1938 to his son, Rav Nochum Zev, who was then learning in Telshe, Lithuania. "Everybody seeks a happy life. We must first have a clear idea concerning the meaning of happiness (otherwise, what we think we want, we really do not want). If we were to question the average person, 'What is happiness?' his response would probably be 'Having everything one wants.' Since what people want most costs money, it would give that money is the

key to happiness. Thus, the happy man must be the brilliant businessman, the top executive, the go-getter, who views every moment in life as an opportunity for making money. Ambition is what breeds success. Do not stop for a moment. Do not be a *batlan*, ne'er-do-well, who apparently lacks the quality of ambition.

"Let us go a step further. Have we ever actually seen a happy man? Most people will, upon first glance, respond, 'Yes, we have seen happy people.' True, we may conjecture that there are some wealthy people that are not all that happy, but, for the most part, wealth and happiness are synonymous with one another. They certainly appear to be happy. Interestingly, when they are discreetly asked to tell the truth, their response is: 'No, I am not really happy.' They might have *osher* with an *ayin* which spells wealth, but they lack *osher* with an *aleph*, which means happiness.

"It is usually the same problem across the board. Wife is unhappy; she never has enough to keep her in a decent mood. The children are spoiled rotten and are doing poorly in school; they do not seem to care. When children are uncaring about life, they take it out on their parents. After all, they have given them everything. So, when all is said and done, the rich man only appears happy. He is far from being enviable.

"Perhaps it is the middle-income bracket which engenders happiness. These are people who work hard all of their lives and fall in between the "haves" and "have-nots;" they neither benefit from programs that help the poor, nor are they able to maintain much status among the wealthier echelons of society. They spend their entire lives working in preparation for retirement, when they plan on being happy. Sadly, when they achieve retirement status, they are either too old or too weak, with little rest left for enjoyment. They certainly are not the paradigms of happiness.

"So, it must be the worker who barely ekes out a living, who complains bitterly concerning his 'miserable' lot in life. He cannot represent the standard for happiness, because he is always complaining about something. If he is not being exploited by the rich, then he is getting a raw deal from someone else. His life seems too wretched to be considered happy.

"Having shown that happiness in the way we perceive it does not really exist, we then ask why Hashem created such a wonderful world in which everybody within it lives in misery, in which its inhabitants do not seem able to achieve the elusive happiness for which everyone strives? Hashem does not make mistakes. We are not properly reading the script, the way it is meant to be read. Our Sages teach, 'Jealousy, lust and glory/status-seeking remove a man from this world' (*Pirkei Avos* 4:28). The world as G-d created it is a happy place. It is we who have removed ourselves from the world of happiness created by Hashem. We have transformed a world with great potential for joy into a world of suffering. This was accomplished when we fell prey to the three greatest obstacles to joy – *kinah*, envy; *taavah*, lust; *kavod*, glory seeking.

"*Chazal* teach (*Pirkei Avos* 3:1), 'Who is (a) rich (man)? He who rejoices in his portion.' They do

not say that he is 'also rich'; nor do they say that he is 'very rich.' They say that he is rich – period! One who is not satisfied with his portion/lot in life is not only not happy, he is not rich – regardless of the size of his bank account. It is not about money; it is about being *tzufrieden*, happy, with what Hashem chose for him.

"There are 'haves' and 'have nots'. The 'haves' are happy with their portion in life. The 'have nots' are poor, because, regardless of how much they have, it is either not enough, or it is not what they want. There is no happiness in the world in material things; there is only happiness in spiritual concerns. The individual who enjoys a rich spiritual life is happy. There is no other kind of happiness in existence.

"This feeling is evinced by real *bnei Torah*, those fortunate individuals who devote their whole minds and desire, enthusiasm and ambition, to the pursuit of Torah and wisdom. They are the ones who experience true joy in this world. While there certainly cannot be happiness without goals, drive and ambition – it all depends upon what are these goals and to what ends, and for what purpose the drive and ambition is directed. Happiness is achieved when the goals which one has set for himself are attainable, when they are not contingent upon someone else's approval for their fulfillment, when they are free of those self-frustrating and destructive urges called jealousy, lust and glory seeking. This can be only when one's ambition flows from the love of Torah, love of wisdom, love of *mussar* – the desire for true, ethical living."

I have cut the letter short, but the author's incredible foresight is amazing, in his ability to cut through the ambiguity that plagues so many and to address the crux of the problem.

Horav Noach Weinberg, zl, was once visited by a young man who had an unusually happy disposition. The *Rosh Yeshivah* asked him for his "secret." He replied, "When I was eleven years old, I received a gift of happiness from G-d. I was riding my bicycle when a strong gust of wind blew me onto the ground, into the path of an oncoming truck. The truck ran over me, severing my leg.

"As I lay there bleeding, I realized that I might be relegated to living the rest of my life without a leg. How depressing! But then I realized that being depressed would not bring back my leg. So, I decided right then and there not to waste my life despairing.

"When my parents arrived at the hospital, they were shocked and grief-stricken. So I told them, 'I have already adapted. Now you too must get used to this.'

"Ever since then, I see one of my friends getting upset about little things: his bus came late; he received a bad grade on his test; somebody insulted him. I, however, just enjoy life."

At a young age, this young man had attained the perspicuity that focusing on what we are missing is a waste of energy. The key to happiness is to take pleasure and satisfaction in what one has. This, explains Rav Weinberg, is the underlying meaning of *sameach b'chelko*, being

happy/satisfied with one's portion (in life). Happiness is a state of mind in which one focuses on the gifts that G-d has granted him. One can have millions and yet be miserable – or he can have very little, yet feel unbridled joy.

There is one catch to being happy: One must open up his eyes and be willing to see the blessing which Hashem has given him. One who is blind to blessing is cursed. It is a self-generated torment for which no one is to blame other than he who refuses to see beyond the limits of his myopic vision.