

Behold! I set before you today the blessing and the curse. (11:26)

“It is either/or,” writes *Targum Yonasan: Ana mesader kadameichou birkesa v’chilufta*, “I arranged for you today a blessing and its opposite. *Sforno* writes, “Perceive that your affairs are not of an intermediate nature – as is the case concerning other nations. The fate of other nations is not marked by full prosperity or complete devastation – as is ours. Theirs is not a condition of extremes: of blessing and curse.” The lot of Hashem’s People, His children, is destined to be the most uncommon, in which there will be no middle course. We will either be blessed or cursed. *Klal Yisrael* does not have the luxury of a moderate stance. One is either good/blessed or bad/cursed. Torah brooks no compromise. Our commitment to Hashem must be total, unequivocal. Thus, our decision (which should be one of clarity) has two options: blessing or curse – one or the other. We cannot have both.

Centrism is a form of moderation and compromise. I once heard a powerful idea attributed to the *Kotzker Rebbe, zl*, who commented concerning those who choose the middle road, the road of compromise, the centrist road. He said, “There is no middle road when it comes to *avodas Hashem*, serving G-d. One is either a *tzaddik* or a *rasha*.” The *Rebbe* peered out the window and said, “Men/human beings walk on the sidewalk – on the right or left side of the street. In the middle go the horses.” Nothing can be added to his holy words. It may sound like I am preaching living to the extreme. For a Jew, life is to the extreme. One cannot relax his Torah observance, perform his *mitzvos* at a more convenient time. One either performs or he is a *rasha*. If one chooses a centrist approach based upon compromise, he risks walking together with the horses – or worse – being considered to be one of them.

Furthermore, the blessing and curse to which the Torah refers are not rewards; rather, they define the life one leads. One who listens to Hashem is blessed. One who refuses to listen is cursed. It is as simple as that. It is something that *re’eh*, one can see – if he is willing to open his eyes and look. This is not the place to dramatize and spell out the ill effects of a “non-listening” lifestyle. It is *re’eh*, plain for all to see.

Since we have no middle road -- and not listening is fraught with the danger of curse -- it is important, writes the *Chazon Ish, zl*, to inculcate into the hearts and minds of our youth that one must go to the extreme, not compromise, not accept any artificial form of observance. It is either the real thing or it is nothing. They must see the *derech ha’emes*, path of truth, without embellishment, without ambiguity. It is very much like a bird that flies in the sky. It must constantly flap its wings or else it falls to the ground. It can glide only so far. So, too, must we always keep our wings flapping and stay the course.

Horav Lazar Brody, Shlita, offers an excellent analogy to illustrate how the closer one gravitates to a life of observance, of blessing, the further he removes himself from the source of curse. A king

had an only son, who was very special to him. Enamored with his son, the king would do anything for the prince. One day, the prince began to complain of severe pain in his feet. A few days later, his feet began to swell; infection was beginning to set in. The king summoned medical specialists from all over the kingdom. The greatest medical minds of the land came and were confronted with a medical mystery which no one could solve. Finally, after great deliberation, they came to the overwhelming conclusion: the prince's legs must be amputated.

When the king heard the diagnosis and dreaded cure, he asked, "Are you absolutely certain that this is the only way to save my dear son's life?" The physicians shook their collective heads, nodding to the affirmative. The prince's legs must be amputated, or he would soon die. They scheduled the surgery, as the broken-hearted king prepared for the worst. Suddenly, the royal shoemaker ran into the palace and begged to be heard. What could a shoemaker have to add to the educated opinions of such distinguished physicians? "Please, my king, permit me to speak. I can cure the prince," the shoemaker declared, somewhat out of breath. The physicians were at first shocked with this man's insolence. What could he offer that they, the brilliant doctors, could not achieve? The shoemaker looked at the king with pleading eyes, "Please!" he asked. "Allow me one chance." The king listened. After all, the shoemaker was a trusted and devoted citizen, and he made fine shoes.

"My king, I am the heir to a distinguished lineage of master craftsmen. For generations, my family has provided the finest leather shoes for the royal family. As such, we understand the dynamics of the foot and the critical importance of wearing proper, well-fitting shoes. Ill-fitting shoes can cause many problems, even circulation issues." The shoemaker examined the prince's feet and prescribed a comfortable shoe in a larger size. Two days later, the prince's gray pallor began to subside, and his color began to return. The pain dissipated and the weakness improved, as the prince was able to get off the bed and walk with support. Within ten days the prince was completely cured, to the overwhelming joy of his parents and the rest of the kingdom.

The lesson is clear: *Am Yisrael* is compared to the ill crown prince, who is impeded by the severe, debilitating pain in his feet, which hinders his mobility and health. The infection in the prince's feet exemplifies our bitter exile, with the actual feet representing Jewish life. The king's physicians are the philosophers, *maskillim*, enlightened by the modernism preached by a society bent on secularism and the abolishment of religion. The shoes are the *tarbus ha'goyim*, gentile culture, with its liberal -- often hedonistic and usually immoral -- views. The new correct-fitting shoes signify a life of Torah adherence, ritual observance, and *mitzvah* performance. The shoemaker is none other than the *tzaddik*, holy, righteous leader of the generation -- whose job it is to save the prince from the faulty diagnosis of the secularists.

The secularists, reformers who seek to modernize Jewry, blame all of its supposed ills on tradition. They feel that the only solution to Jewish life in exile is amputation, severing our relationship with the past, with *Sinai*, with Hashem. The *tzaddik* teaches otherwise. Only by living a life of Torah does the Jewish soul achieve its proper "fit." It does not require a podiatrist to understand the

message of this analogy.