

See, I present before you today, a blessing and a curse. (11:26)

It all boils down to choices. It is either a blessing or a curse. We really cannot have it both ways. A blessing that ends up as a curse is not much of a blessing. Why is it that some of us become victim to the “poor choice syndrome”? Why can we not look at a poor choice for what is, and just say, “No”? It is the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, who does an excellent job of concealing the curse in our poor choices. In fact, he often presents it as a blessing, and we fall for his ruse. The *yetzer hora* is very crafty. He never presents us with a choice between good and evil, curse and blessing. It is always about two blessings. Which “blessing” should we choose? The *yetzer hora* encourages us to select the “blessing” which is really a sham, a curse dressed up in “blessing’s” clothing.

It is no wonder that *Parashas Re’eh* coincides with the beginning of the *chodesh*, month, of *Elul*, when introspection of the past and change for the present – so that there is hope for the future – are the primary foci of every thinking Jew. The imperative to decide which path to choose stands before us. We must be vigilant not to allow the *yetzer hora* to misguide us. In *Yeshivas Knesses Chizkiyahu/K’far Chassidim*, during the tenure of its venerable *Mashgiach*, *Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl*, this emotion was palpable. Every *shmuess*, ethical discourse, was replete with reminders and exhortations concerning the gravity of the time, the Heavenly decision concerning each individual’s future which was being determined, and what each was doing to ensure a positive outcome. A red marking was placed upon the neck of the tenth animal to enter the pen, thus marking it for the tithe. This ritual designated the tenth animal as *maaser beheimah*. Likewise, this sets the pattern for human beings, as we emotionally recite the *tefillah*, prayer, of *U’Nesaneh Tokef*, which compares humans on *Rosh Hashanah* (who pass before Hashem) to their animal counterparts who pass under their master’s rod, every tenth one marked in red, to be offered as a sacrifice.

When the *Mashgiach* spoke, he tearfully implored his students to do everything in their abilities to prepare for the *Yom HaDin*, Day of Judgment, so that the red mark would not designate any one of them to be singled out as a sacrifice. He would reiterate to the students not to become one of those marked with the *pas adom*, red stripe.

It happened in the early years of the *yeshivah*, when it was still situated in Zichron Yaakov. The *bachurim*, *yeshivah* students, returned from *Tashlich* (the *Rosh Hashanah* service that is recited at a body of water, during which the worshippers symbolically throw their sins into a source of water), amid much singing, joy and dancing. Seeing this, the *Mashgiach* said that he would like to address the student body that evening.

Rav Elya commenced his discourse with the words of the *U’Nesaneh Tokef* prayer: *K’vakoras ro’eh edro, maavir tzono tachas shivto*, “Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff.” He went on to relate his revered *Rebbe’s* (*Horav Yitzchak Blazer, zl*) comments: “The shepherd begins to count his sheep as they each enter a narrow walkway, ‘One, two, three,

etc.' he counts, until he arrives at number ten. At that point, he places a red mark/stripe on the neck of the tenth sheep, a designation that this sheep is destined to be slaughtered (as *Maaser*). The sheep is unaware of its 'identification.' It has no idea that the red mark spells death. Thus, clueless, it dances and revels with the other sheep, heedless of its fate. 'Oy!' we cry out to the sheep. 'Why are you prancing around so joyfully, unaware of your destiny? Fool that you are; jump into the water and wash off the mark before you are led away to your death. Do what you can to save yourself!'"

The *Mashgiach* looked into the faces of his students and cried out, "Why are you dancing? What if you have the 'mark'? Will you dance then, too? Wash it off with *teshuvah*, repentance, and *tefillah*." They all broke into bitter weeping: the elderly, the saintly *Mashgiach*, and his young students. The windows were open, and the members of the community who were walking by heard the tumult, and they, too, began to weep. "It is within our ability to erase the red stripe. Now is the time!" This was *Rav Elya's* motto throughout *Elul*, going into *Rosh Hashanah*, and onward to *Yom Kippur*. We must "erase the mark."