

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

When one peruses Jewish history, it is apparent that the pendulum of Jewish fortune swings to extremes. We have been blessed with either incredible prosperity or drastic misfortune. Even concerning the individual, one is either highly successful, very observant, or sadly, the extreme opposite. While it may not be obvious to the casual observer, if one were to cogently look at life, he would see that for the Jew, life is either about ceaseless blessing or unbearable curse. Even with regard to sin, the Torah relates in the *parsha* of *Krias Shema: He'shamru la'chem pen yifteh levavechem – v'sartem, va'avaditem elohim acheirim*, "Beware for yourselves, lest your heart be seduced – and you will turn astray and serve gods of others" (*Devarim* 11:16). There is no in-between road. One is either totally subservient to Hashem or he is an idol-worshipper.

In the opening *Rashi* to *Sefer Mishlei*, the quintessential commentator writes that the title of the *Sefer Mishlei* – translated as *Proverbs* – refers to various literary devices used to render the subject matter more comprehensible. Hence, the Torah is allegorized as an *ishah tovah*, good woman, and *avodas kochavim*, idol-worship, as an *ishah zonah*, a harlot. While this is a wonderful commentary on the status of the Jewish woman, one wonders at the extreme: one is either an *ishah tovah* or an *ishah zonah*. The precipice that divides the two, I think, is, *pen yifteh levavechem*, "lest your heart be seduced." Once the heart has been swayed, then everything goes; one plummets in a downward descent at a mind-boggling speed, to the point of *v'sartem va'avaditem elohim acheirim*, "You will turn astray and serve gods of others." Is there no middle road? Is one either "good" or "very bad"? If so, why?

The answer to this question is simple: We are different. In a famous comment to the first *pasuk* of our *Parsha*, "See/Behold! I set before you today a blessing and a curse," *Sforno* writes: "Look and see that your affairs (as a nation) will never be, *al ofan beinoni*, of an average nature, as is the case with other nations. For today I set before you either blessing or curse: two extremes. Blessing implies success even beyond that which is sufficient, and curse implies such deficiency that attainment even of requirements is out of reach. Both of these are before you to attain, according to what you choose."

We are not like everyone else. Mediocrity is not intrinsic to our system. We are either on "top" – or on the "bottom." Does it have to be this way? Would it be so bad if our lives and fortunes would mirror that of the nations of the world? Is something wrong with living a stable, average existence?

This question was intimated by none other than Eisav *ha'rasha*, when he asked, "I am going to die, and so of what use to me is the birthright?" (*Bereishis* 25:32). *Rashi* explains: Eisav asked Yaakov *Avinu*, "What is the nature of the Temple Service which is performed by a *b'chor*, firstborn?" Yaakov replied, "Many warnings and punishments and death penalties are associated with it!" Eisav responded, "So who needs it? I would die through it!" In other words, Eisav asked Yaakov,

“Why would anyone in his right mind seek a position which can destroy him at the slightest hint of error?” It really is not a bad question – for someone like Eisav!

Horav Yeruchum Levovitz, zl, derives a fundamental principle from this dialogue between the two famous brothers. “This issue occurs on every level. Corresponding to the greatness of the spiritual level is the detriment of loss.” The greater and more sublime the spiritual level, the greater will be the lack in its absence. The *Kohen* has unique responsibilities which demand a higher level of Divine service than what is demanded of the average Jew. Thus, if he fails, he is subject to a much harsher punishment. It goes with the territory.

The question arises: Who needs it all? *Rav Yeruchum* asks, “Is exalted spirituality with its potential for tremendous reward better for man, or does the fear of terrible punishment and personal degradation, which are the result of failure, outweigh the benefits?” In other words: Would one not want to forego the opportunity for the reward due to the ominous gloom associated with failure?

The Jews went through this decision following the Revelation. In *Sefer Devarim* (5:21,24) *Moshe Rabbeinu* recounts how the people were so overawed by the *mysterium tremendum* of the Revelation that they requested that *Moshe* do the “talking” – that he convey the *mitzvos* to them. Apparently, the clarity of truth experienced by the people upon hearing the *mitzvos* firsthand from the Almighty was too much for them. It engendered great responsibility, awesome obligation, something which they were not sure they could live up to. While their rejection of this unprecedented opportunity aggrieved *Moshe*, Hashem said, “They did well.” He praised them for taking the easy way out. The question that now confronts us is: How did the nation act in a different manner than *Eisav*? They saw heavy punishment; he saw the same. He opted out; they did the same. Yet, Hashem agreed with them. Why?

Horav Mordechai Miller, zl, explains that essentially *Chazal* have previously engaged in the debate. *Bais Shammai* and *Bais Hillel* argued for two-and a half years concerning whether it was better to have been created or not to have been created. The conclusion was: Better it would have been had man not been created. However, *ex post facto*, let him scrutinize his deeds and act appropriately. Once again, was *Eisav* that far off the mark?

Rav Miller distinguishes between the forms of *yiraah*, fear: *yiraas ha'onesh*, fear of punishment; and *yiraas ha'Romemus*, fear of awe/the Exalted the reverence stemming from a deep and abiding love founded in an acknowledgment of the truth. He cites the *Avnei Nezer* who explains that *Yitzchak Avinu* personified fear which originates from love. It means that man loves Hashem so much that he fears that some distance might come between them. The difference between these two forms of fear is what results. One who loves does not hate. One who fears retribution, who fears future punishment, however, is filled with an emotion that can degenerate into resentment.

One who serves Hashem merely out of fear of punishment is encouraged not to take on added

responsibility, for instead of sensing the privilege it offers, he will constantly obsess over the negative consequences if he were to err. This is the approach which Eisav took. He was being realistic. Too many obligations and extra tasks, would destroy him. The less, the better – and get it over with.

When *Klal Yisrael* stood at *Har Sinai*, they were elevated to such a sublime level that they were totally divorced from physicality. As *Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler* writes: “They ascended to a place that is beyond the capacity of any human to attain through his own exertion.” Yet, despite all of this, they wanted to hear the Commandment from Moshe, rather than directly from Hashem. How could they fear death if they had just experienced a parting of the soul from the body? The answer is that their fear was not of death, but that they would not be able to sustain this incredible relationship. It was a fear stemming from a love that is beyond the level of appreciation. Their love was the result of **total** devotion and the **ultimate** closeness they had attained with Hashem.

This same fear generated by love was the impetus which catalyzed the dispute between *Bais Shammai* and *Bais Hillel*. After counting the number of prohibitive *mitzvos*

(365) versus the number of positive commandments (248), they decided that the opportunities available to actually draw close to Hashem were outnumbered by the various dangers from which one might guard himself. Their conclusion was that since man is fearful that sin would isolate him from the desired closeness with Hashem that he would want to achieve (i.e., that negativity would numb the warmth that he yearned for so passionately), it was better for man to have never been created. It would have been far better that man never have been placed in a situation in which he might sever the most significant relationship that could exist.

We return to the beginning of our *Parsha* in which *Klal Yisrael* is presented with two opposing extremes. They are being told that being mediocre serves quite well for the nations of the world, but is not an option for them. It is either/or – nothing in the middle. When we stood at the foot of *Har Sinai* and accepted the Torah, we entered a new league of humanity, a new epoch in our existence. We were elevated above the rest of humanity. Consequently, we are unable to live on the same plane. Indeed, it is specifically our lofty plateau, with its newly-incurred obligations, that poses the greatest challenge for us. If we fail to succeed, it will be our downfall.

The question is: Do we need all this? Is it desirable for man to strive to lofty heights if he thereby risks plummeting to the depths? This is not a new question. *Rav Yeruchum* cites the *Mesillas Yescharim*, who refers to those individuals who refuse to elevate themselves due to their fear of falling – as fools. They would rather remain oblivious to a life of Torah, its pulsating beauty and spiritual wealth. They would rather live a life of mediocrity, content with merely avoiding punishment. Only someone who appreciates the inestimable value of Torah will gladly commit himself to it, regardless of the difficulties and possible punishments for failure such a commitment engenders. This person’s love transcends the challenges.

Those who foolishly repudiate this lifestyle – settling instead, **first** for mediocrity, **then** for total spiritual oblivion – use fear of negative consequences as a crutch, as an excuse. Veritably, it all stems from their attachment to a life of materialism.

To those whose heart invokes them to attach themselves to a life of spiritual blessing, but in the back of their minds still tremble with trepidation at the possibility of retribution, *Rav Yeruchum* offers the following advice, which I feel should be a Jew's mantra and source of pride – especially when he sees a world around him ensconced in materialistic pursuit and hedonism. To paraphrase the *Mashgiach*: “When a person sees a horse or any other animal, does man really envy the animal's freedom? Beasts do not shoulder the burden of a livelihood, their sustenance is available everywhere. Living a life of constant gratification and recreation, animals have no worries. **However, no fool or simpleton would ever desire to be a horse!** Ultimately with all of the difficulties and burdens it involves, man knows that the greatest satisfaction and pleasure is to be a man!”