

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

One of the basic tenets of Judaism is that man is equipped with the ability to **discern** between good and bad, right and wrong. He is also equipped with the capacity to **choose** right over wrong, good over evil. Contrary to popular opinion, man is **not** destined to do bad, to veer to the wrong side of the truth. If he does so, it is purely of his own volition, and not due to a predetermined GPS within his psyche that always steers him to do evil. The Torah says, "See/Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse." Towards the end of *Sefer Devarim* (30:19), we are admonished to "Choose life!" All of this makes sense. Hashem wants us to make the correct and proper choices. However, there is more to it. Our choices not only affects us personally, but an individual Jew's choice to do good affects the entire world.

We begin our day with a number of blessings, one of which is, *Asher nossan la'sechvi vinah l'hovchin bein yom u'bein loylah*, "Who gave the heart (lit. rooster) the wisdom/understanding to discern between day and night." The *Sfas Emes* cites his grandfather, the *Chiddushei HaRim*, who explains that the light of day is a reference to the *spiritual* and the opportunity to grow closer to Hashem; while the darkness of night alludes to the *material* dimension, which can bring man to sin. In this blessing, we express gratitude to the Almighty for granting us the power to distinguish between the two. The *Sfas Emes* adds that, while continued sin desensitizes a person, distorting his projected image of evil, Hashem constantly renews man's consciousness, thus enabling him to choose correctly once again. This is the meaning of the **daily** blessing – acknowledging one's renewed blessing **every day**.

Therefore, why does man not intuitively choose a life of blessing? Why would one want a life of curse? Indeed, why do so many presumably intelligent people, who consider themselves by today's standards to be *frum*, observant people, often make the "wrong" choices for their lives? The *Sfas Emes* explains that choosing a life of blessing is possible only if one is a true *ben-Torah*, one who views life and living through the spectrum of Torah. Blessing and curse are defined by the Torah – not by contemporary society.

Sfas Emes cites the *Midrash* that supports this idea. "'See/Behold! I have set before you today a blessing and a curse.' What is written just before this exhortation? 'If you will keep (guard) all of this *mitzvah*' (*Devarim* 11:22). What is the meaning of the word(s) "**this mitzvah**?" Rabbi Levi says it's *Krias Shema*. The *Rabbanan* say its *Shabbos*." Another explanation: man's soul and the Torah are compared to a candle, as it is written, "The candle of Hashem is man's soul" (*Mishlei* 6:23). Hashem says, "My candle is in your hand; and your candle is in Mine. If you guard My candle I will guard yours, but, if you extinguish My candle, I will extinguish yours, as well." Three concepts in this *Midrash* must be explained: What is meant by, "Hashem's candle is in our hands"? Why are *Shabbos* and *Shema*, in particular, those *mitzvos* that engender blessing or curse?

Sfas Emes explains that Hashem renews Creation daily. The flow of renewal, however, is dependent on *Klal Yisrael*. This is intimated by the *pasuk*, "I set before you today a blessing and a curse." *Klal Yisrael* receives the flow of blessing in accordance with their preparation. It then flows to the rest of the world **through the Jewish People**. If *Klal Yisrael* is lax in their preparation, if their attitude is left wanting, then the entire world will suffer (since, as mentioned, the flow of blessing parallels the preparation).

Chazal compare this spiritual flow to a candle. Every Jew carries Hashem's candle through the dark night, represented by This World. His hands cup the flame, preventing it from becoming extinguished. A Jew's daily prayers and blessings are like the oil that enables the candle to glow.

This *pasuk* teaches that the blessing and curses were placed *lifneichem*, before *Klal Yisrael* as a collective group. There are certain *mitzvos* which unite our people. Sanctifying the *Shabbos* is one of them. In *Nusach Sfar*, we recite the *Raza d'Shabbos* as part of the *K'gavna* prayer: "*Raza d'Shabbos*, the secret of *Shabbos*... *b'raza d'Echad*, the secret of unity." The *Shema* prayer calls upon the entire Jewish nation to proclaim the Oneness of Hashem. These *mitzvos* have unique status in serving as catalysts for uniting *Klal Yisrael*, thereby bringing the spiritual flow of blessing to the world.

This idea is alluded to by *Yirmiyahu HaNavi: Shimu v'haazinu al tigbahu*, "Listen and pay attention, do not rise up" (*Yirmiyahu* 13:15). *Chazal* question the phrase, "Do not rise up." They explain that it is an admonishment not to prevent the spiritual flow of blessing from entering the world.

Now, to put it all together: The Jewish People were created to attest to the fact that Hashem creates the world anew each day. This idea disputes those who contend that while Hashem might have created the world, He abandoned it a long time ago. Hashem is prepared to renew the fire, lightning and thunder that personified the Revelation with one condition: We must be attuned to listen to it. David *Ha'melech* says, *Shimah ami va'adabeira*, "Listen My People, and I shall speak" (*Tehillim* 50:7). Regrettably, no one is prepared to listen. *Chazal* teach that *B'chol yom va'yom Bas Kol yotzais mei'Har Chorev*, "Each day a Heavenly Voice emanates from Mount Chorev, declaring, 'Oy la'hem la'briyos mei'elbonah shel Torah, Woe to them, to the people, for the disgrace of the Torah!'" (*Pirkei Avos* 6:2). This means that the Heavenly Voice is waiting to be heard, but, regrettably, we "raise ourselves up" and prevent spiritual flow from entering the world.

Ki ner mitzvah v'Torah or, "For the *mitzvos* are a candle and the Torah is the light." By fulfilling *mitzvos*, we awaken the world's spiritual potential. Like candles, *mitzvos* illuminate each seemingly physical act and connect it to the Creator. The *Midrash's* allegory of Hashem allowing us to hold the candle is a metaphor which shows that each Jew is personally responsible to enlighten a certain aspect of spirituality. He must do it himself – no one else. Until he strengthens himself to do so, that point which is his personal responsibility remains incarcerated in a dark prison. The *parshah* commences with the word, *Re'eh!* "See!" By choosing life, we connect to that exclusive point and are actually able to **see** the blessings.

In conclusion: The choice of a Jew to do good has ramifications for the entire world. When we work in harmony with the entire *Klal Yisrael*, such as, *shemiras Shabbos*, *kabollas ol Malchus Shomayim*, observing *Shabbos* and collectively accepting the yoke of Heaven on ourselves, we unify ourselves and unify Hashem. This is the secret of *Shabbos* and the *Shema Yisrael: Yichud haBorei*, the unity of the Creator. We have Hashem's "candle" – His Torah and *mitzvos* - in our hands; He has our *neshamos*, souls, in His hands. It is tit for tat. When we observe the *mitzvos*, the Torah illuminates our lives, granting us the ability to **see**. Thus, Hashem allows the flow of blessing to reach our *neshamos*. We "see"; we "choose"; we "live."