

YOU WILL PRESENT THE BLESSING

Magidah Khulda bat Sarah & Rabbi Moshe ben Asher, Ph.D.

What do you have to do to get a blessing?

The opening verses of *parasha* (Torah reading) Re'eh provide an answer: "See, I place before you this day a blessing and a curse. The blessing: that you listen to the commands of God And the curse, if you do not listen. . . ." (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)

And then our scripture goes on to say: "And it shall come to pass when God, your God, has brought you in to the land where you are going to take possession, that you will present the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eval." (Deuteronomy 11:29)

You will present the blessing, the scripture says. And we would like you to do that right now in your imagination.

So imagine: You're walking to a place you've never been before. Look around you. You're not alone. Your family, your friends, your tribe, many others walk with you, some older, some young.

One of the children asks you: "Where are we going?"

And you answer: "Into the mountains, the Ephraim Mountains."

"Why?" another asks.

"You'll see," you answer.

If you look ahead, you can see in the distance, a valley between two mountains. If you look behind you, you see wave after wave of walkers. But in spite of the crowd, you remember the ones who are missing. Those you loved who died after 40 years of wandering in the wilderness.

But that wandering is over now. You can hardly believe it, for you are entering the land. You find yourself in a valley. Two mountains loom up on either side.

"Are we there yet?" a child asks.

"Yes, almost," you say.

You have come such a great distance, and yet, now that you are there, it doesn't seem so far at all.

Is your tribe Simon, Levi, Judah, Isachar, Joseph or Benjamin?

If so, your mountain is to the south of the valley. You find your place at the foot of Mount Gerizim.

"Let us go up," someone says. And you do. You feel yourself climbing in a spirit of blessing. The sun smiles down on you. You climb in the shade of fruit trees on a smiling green slope. If you reach up, you can almost touch the fruit.

Or is your tribe Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, or Naftali?

If so, your mountain is on the north side of the valley. You find your place at the foot of Mount Eval. . . .

"Let us go up," someone says.

And you do. But you ascend in the spirit of a curse. For you climb without shade on a slope that is steep and bare and bleak. The sun beats down on you.

Or perhaps you are a *kohein* or an elder of the Levites. If so, you crowd together around the ark in the valley between the two mountains. And if you are a *kohein*, you turn towards Mount Gerizim. You call out the blessings.

And you, the people, at the top of both mountains call back: *Amein*.

Now, you priests turn towards Mount Eval. You call out the curses.

And you, the people at the top of both mountains, call back: *Amein*.

If you look from the one mountain to the other, you can't help thinking that, in a strange way, Mount Gerizim looks like a blessing, and Mount Eval looks like a curse.

Why such a ceremony for entering the land?

Our rabbis have said that in effect this ceremony constituted a renewed acceptance of the Torah. The blessings and curses were actually 12 commandments prohibiting such things as cursing a parent, causing a blind person to go astray on the road, moving a landmark, perverting justice for a proselyte, orphan or widow, the worship of idols, sexual crimes such as incest, striking a fellow, taking a bribe to kill an innocent person, etc. And the people would acknowledge publicly that blessings await those who observe these commandments and curses await those who don't.

But why would the nation need such a ceremony? Hadn't we already been given the commandments at Mount Sinai? Hadn't we already accepted a covenant?

According to the rabbis, these 12 subjects of the blessings and curses are acts of the sort that transgressors could do secretly. Thus the entire nation would inaugurate its occupation of the Land by declaring that there can be no contradiction between public and private morality; a nation that considers it acceptable to sin in private will inevitably see erosion in its public moral integrity.

Also, Sforno (Rabbi Ovadia ben Yaakov, 1470-1550) comments that these 12 are the sort of sins that are committed by powerful and influential people, who are often beyond the reach of the law.

What has all this got to do with us?

According to Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888), the people standing on Gerizim and Eval presented the alternative of blessing or curse to themselves and to all contemporary and future members of the nation. That means us!

And yet doesn't it seem far-fetched for us in the modern world that an act we commit in secret would necessarily be punished? After all don't we all know lots of people who do bad things and don't get punished and people who do good things and don't get blessed?

Malbim (Rabbi Meir Lob ben Jehiel Michael, 1809-1879), the great Jewish commentator who made a study of Biblical Hebrew semantics, gives the following explanation: "Do not imagine that there is any reward in this world outside the good deed itself. It is not like the case of the master who rewards his servant for loyalty and punishes him for disobedience. . . . It is like the case of the doctor who assures his patient that he will be well, as long as he adheres to the regimen he prescribes, and that if he doesn't, he will die."

The consequences are inherent in the deed itself. By our wrongdoing we create a kind of death in ourselves. As the voice of God says in parasha Emor (Leviticus 22:32): *V'lo t'chal'lu et sheim kodshi* (ולא תחללו את-שם קדשי)—Do not profane

My Holy Name.) That word *t'chal'lu* (תחללו), profane, comes from ח-ל-ל, the same root as the word for corpse—which, says Rabbi Hirsch, means that we should not, through our behavior, make the name of God and ourselves into a corpse.

If this seems far-fetched, think about this: Have you ever thought during or after you did something wrong that some part of you felt dead?

But perhaps a better question would be: Who will suffer the death?

For as Rabbi Hirsch explains: "The welfare of the whole nation depends on the decisions of individuals to act for a blessing or a curse." The consequences for good or evil are not only for the individual, but also for the whole people.

But do we have an experience of such consequences in the modern world?

We certainly do if the act becomes known. If, for example, a president of a nation or some other powerful person commits adultery in secret, and that act becomes known.

But supposing the act does not become known? What then?

Let's forget about the former president for the moment and bring it down more to our level. There is a commandment among the 12 blessings and curses that we not place a stumbling block before the blind (Leviticus 19:14), which is understood to mean more than just the physically blind. For example, it is forbidden to give bad counsel to someone on a matter that you have information about.

Let's say that my neighbor asks me for advice about a piece of land that he wants to buy. As it happens, I have information about the land. Though the land is not good, I stand to profit by his purchase of it. So I lie to him. I tell him that he should buy the land.

Are there consequences inherent in the deed itself? Nobody knows that I lied, so what's the difference?

The difference is that I know about it. As ben Azzai, an early second century Palestinian scholar, said: ". . . One sin leads to another sin; for the consequence of a *mitzvah* is a *mitzvah*, and the consequence of a sin is a sin." (Pirke Avot 4:2) It's likely my bad deed will lead me to commit another, and in doing it, there will be consequences for me. But there will probably be other consequences beyond myself.

My neighbor's life may be negatively affected, potentially for generations to come. Beyond that, even though my neighbor may only wonder what went wrong, the wrong itself is operative in the world. That is, to the extent that wrong is opera-

tive, belief in justice is undermined, and people lose hope and faith in themselves and in the world.

I will never forget walking home from *shul* in Baltimore one Shabbat in a “nice,” mostly Orthodox Jewish neighborhood. If I had been only about 10 or 15 feet further along, I would have witnessed the shooting of a young man in his driveway, and would probably have been mowed down by the Cadillac Escalade of the perpetrators fleeing the scene. As it was, I heard the shots and came upon the immediate aftermath. The Cadillac roared out of the driveway. A young gunshot victim lay face down in the driveway. A few minutes later he died. Then the police arrived and interviewed people.

Many of the neighbors stood around in silence. Finally, though, someone said: “This kind of thing never happened here before.” I think we were all wondering what it would mean for the neighborhood.

Would it happen again? If so, would we be helpless to do anything about it? Would we have to move?

You see, the rabbis never conceived of a cost that would be borne by the individual alone. A community is created by individuals, and by the acts of individuals, but the cost is to more than the individual.

The first part of the verse that I quoted earlier, *v'lo t'chal'lu et sheim kodshi*, is followed by: And I will be sanctified amongst the children of Israel.

What does it mean—amongst the children of Israel?

About those words, Rabbi Hirsch has said that if I make myself into a corpse, I will drag others into the grave with me. The alternative between these two conditions of blessing or curse is “placed before us” with God’s Torah—it depends on us to create the one or the other for ourselves.

What would it mean for us to present a blessing?

It would mean that we first understand that our every act is more than our own; it is paid for and owned also by those beyond us. And then, as Rabbi Hirsch has said: We must step forward with our whole being, and with every *mitzvah*-act bless ourselves and those beyond us

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