

The message is quite simple: It is not always about us. Each and every one of us carries an enormous responsibility upon his/her shoulders. The decisions and choices we make do not affect only our lives, but have ramifications throughout time. We owe it to the many generations of our forebears who rely upon us.

כי טוב לו עבדך

For it is good for him with you. (15:16)

The *Talmud Kiddushin* 20a teaches that the *eved Ivri*, Jewish bondsman, enjoys the same standard of living as does his owner. *Imcha b'maachal u'b'mishteha*, "With you in food and drink. You should neither eat white bread while the *eved* eats black bread, nor should you sleep on cushions while he sleeps on straw." This teaches us that one who purchases an *eved* is actually purchasing an *adon*, a master, for himself. *Tosfos* question why the bondsman becomes the master, on a higher level than the owner. Why does the owner not simply have equal status with the *eved*? Why would the *eved* be better? They explain that, as long as the master has two equal pillows, they both have equality. (If he only has one, if neither uses it, it is a *middas Sodom* (a designation used to describe a very evil, heartless person.) Therefore, the master gives the pillow to the *eved*. Now, the *eved* has a pillow and the master has nothing. This is why *Chazal* consider it as if the master now has a master over him. The *Maharit* wonders why Rabbi Akiva's rule of *Chayecha kodmin*, "Your life precedes his." *V'chai achicha imach*, "So that your brother can live with you" (*Vayikra* 25:36). Why should the master be relegated to giving up his pillow, if it means that he will not have a pillow upon which to sleep?

Horav Leib Lopian, zl, offers a powerful insight into the emotions of people and how the Torah is concerned and sensitive to each person's individual feelings. When the owner, who always sleeps on a soft pillow, must give it up, so that his *eved* is comfortable, the owner will (as a result of sleeping on a pillow of straw) feel the pangs of poverty. He now knows what a poor man who cannot afford a soft pillow must endure in a night's sleep. When the *eved* must sleep on a straw pillow, however, his pain goes deeper. He senses more than poverty. He realizes that he has the straw because he is the *eved*, and, since there is only one soft pillow, it goes to the master. Thus, the Torah demands that we delve into the mind of the *eved*, feel what he feels. It is one thing to be poor – and feel it; it is entirely another feeling to feel that one is a slave.

Horav Avraham Gurwitz, Shlita, relates that his father-in-law (*Rav Leib Lopian*) once traveled with an orphaned student to arrange for him (the student) to be able to continue learning in the *yeshivah*. They stopped for the night at a home which had only one bed and a couch for sleeping. *Rav Leib* insisted that the young man use the bed while he (the *Rosh Yeshivah* of Gateshead)

slept on the couch. His son-in-law felt that his rationale was based on the above. If the young man would sleep on the couch, it would awaken within him a sense of sadness over being an orphan. To put it in contemporary vernacular, when someone has a problem, hang-ups, issues which weigh heavily on his mind, if he feels stigmatized because he senses that he is different, any change in his life will exacerbate his feelings of dejection. An orphan carries considerable baggage on his shoulders. When a situation arises in which that weight increases (or, at least, he thinks it did), he will be aware of it.

Va'ani Tefillah

רפאנו ד' ונרפא – Heal us, Hashem. And we will be healed.

Sickness presents the Jew with conflicting emotions. On the one hand, he is religiously challenged. Who does not want to be healthy? Who feels that his actions warrant illness, pain and debilitation? Sickness is an overwhelming challenge for us to overcome. It takes a very special person to accept sickness with equanimity. On the other hand, once we realize that Hashem communicates with us through his agency of illness, we are able to advance on our relationship with Hashem by using illness as the vehicle for engendering prayer, faith and hope. Sickness brings with it loneliness, dejection, feelings of betrayal. Conversely, once we affirm our faith that sickness is Hashem's communication, we realize that we are really not alone, for Hashem is by our side. He employs sickness as a vehicle for spiritual healing. It is an unprecedented opportunity to reach out and strengthen our feelings about Hashem, increase our faith in Him. Thus, as we progress, our loneliness dissipates, as we begin to acknowledge that we are never really alone.

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נפ' כ"ז מנחם אב תשפ"ח

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Parashas Re'eh

תשע"ז

פרשת ראה

**ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה
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.

אבד תאבדון את כל המקומות אשר עבדו שם הגוים אשר אתם ירשים אתם את אלהיהם על ההרים הרמים ועל הגבעות והזת כל עץ רענן

You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations that you are driving away worshipped their gods: on the high mountains and on the hills, and under every leafy tree. (12:2)

The Torah instructs us to destroy the idols and the places where they were worshipped. Actually, *halachah* dictates that only the idol itself is destroyed – not the place upon which the idol was set. Furthermore, if a hill, mountain, or tree attached to the ground was designated as an idol, it did not have to be destroyed. What is the meaning of the Torah’s exhortation to “destroy all the places”? *Horav Michel Feinstein, zl*, explains that, obviously, idols have no power whatsoever. They consist of nothingness; they are simply a ruse to fool their worshippers. One of the methods employed by its priests to ensnare people was to set the idol upon a high place or beneath a verdant tree. Thus, they implied that the idol was of an elevated status, or that it provided comforting shade. In order to refute these false messages, the Torah enjoined us to remove the idol from the place, exposing its diminutive, powerless nature. It is nothing. Once its foundation is removed, its true insignificance is revealed. Everyone now sees that the idol is comprised of emptiness.

This idea applies equally to the idol’s espousers and leadership. When they are revealed in their true colors, when the facade that they represent is exposed,

when the people who have followed them see clearly that their leaders are a sham – the hold these people have over them is broken.

It is related that Aristotle, the great philosopher, was caught in an inappropriate act, clearly not becoming an individual of his distinguished status. When asked how he allowed himself to act in this manner, his answer was classic and indicative of his true essence. “Now, I am not Aristotle,” he responded. He was implying that, once the mask is removed, one sees the true essence of a person. Aristotle’s eminence was based upon a sham. It was all fake. The real Aristotle was capable of acting in the most base and reprehensible manner. Everything else was a façade.

The secular leadership who advocate modernity, who shun tradition and view our way of life as archaic and senseless, are far from elevated people. They live a life of moral abandon, answering only to their whims and passions, while espousing a decadent philosophy and dogma to support their lifestyle. If one were to see them for what they really are, his attachment to them would quickly wane. By piercing through the façade, we pierce their bubble, exposing the bankruptcy of their cause.

כי עם קדוש אתה לך אלוקיך

For you are a holy people to Hashem, your G-d. (14:2)

Rashi explains that our personal *kedushah*, sanctity, is endowed to us by our forebears, our ancestors. In my opinion, herein lies one of the most inspiring principles of Judaism: we are descendants of a holy, illustrious lineage, and, as such, we have a responsibility to maintain this pedigree. This is perhaps one of the reasons that so many assimilated Jews have no impetus to return. They have no idea of their heritage, who they are, and from whom they have descended. The German reformers who initiated the break with traditional Judaism first erased Jewish history. They were acutely aware that, as long as we maintain a connection with the past, it would be difficult to sever one’s relationship with Judaism. Torah became a legend. The Oral Law was the work of a group of overzealous, demanding rabbis; thus, it had no basis in Jewish law. Once that connection was broken, the rest was simple. Many of our ancestors were simple – for the most part not erudite – and economically-challenged people, who remained averse and diffident, living in the ghetto from birth to cradle. Without history, we can have no pride; without pride; we have no destiny.

We owe a debt of gratitude to our long history of forebears; as such, we have a responsibility to maintain their legacy. First and foremost, we owe it to ourselves and to them to study and research that legacy. Who were they? How did they live? How did they die? Why? Certainly, any serious-minded Jew or Jewess who possesses a modicum of intelligence will ask him or herself: So, why am I not following in their footsteps? Why am I not proud of my Jewish identity? After all, are not all of the preceding generations counting on me? Do I not owe them something?

These are timely questions which are sadly not asked much anymore. Today, the lines are drawn. One is either *frum*, observant, or not. Well, at least that is the

way it used to be. Unfortunately, we are discovering more and more that some young people from observant homes have questions which they are not interested in sweeping under the rug. The outside world can today be accessed with the touch of a phone. They are regularly bombarded with enticing propaganda wherever they go. While the vast majority is sheltered from the various media – there are always the innocent few, the troubled, the one child that got away. We are often too busy to notice the change until it is too late. It begins subtly and, with time, becomes more dramatic. We wonder how it happened. Perhaps... just perhaps... maybe we never explained to them that they are part of something great, that they play a critical role in its continuity, and that they have in their hands the power to destroy the hopes and aspirations of thousands of their ancestors. Perhaps the following vignette might awaken someone. It is not new, but its timeless message is certainly worth repeating.

The story takes place in Kiev in 1960, but it must be a story that has often repeated itself, when elderly parents sit down with their children and share with them the regrets concerning the past and their hopes for the future – not their future, but that of their children. In this vignette, an elderly father took a quiet boat ride on the Dnieper River with his last surviving child – his daughter.

We have to remember that many of these parents, although not necessarily old, were nonetheless aged in the sense that they had survived World War II in Russia, and had lived through much persecution and suffering. Many were not physically well and they were emotionally overwhelmed with anxiety concerning the future of their children – not the physical future, but their spiritual/Jewish future.

The father began, “You know, my dear daughter, I had five sons who did not survive the difficult war years. Sadly, I do not have anyone to recite *Kaddish* for me when my time comes to leave this world. Therefore, I want you to be my *Kaddish*, to sanctify your life, so that you will be a living tribute to sanctifying Hashem, thus perpetuating my name. I want you to understand that your concern should not be only for your personal self, but also for the memory of all those in your family who preceded you in life and who are no longer here. You are their hope.

“Now, I know that *Shabbos*, *kashrus*, etc. are *mitzvos* upon which I am certain you would never renege. Our heritage is too much a part of you. It is the basics, such as behaving with a demeanor becoming a member of the *am ha’nivchar*, chosen people, acting and living out your life with *kedushah*, sanctity, *tznius*, moral modesty, both in attire and comportment, that reflect your noble calling. Your dealings with your fellowman should bespeak a status whereby people will comment: ‘There goes Chaim Kohen’s daughter.’

“Our sages teach us a frightening lesson: If children leave the path of Torah forged for them by their parents, then their father’s merit cannot save them – regardless of their father’s virtue and piety. On the other hand, a child who is a *tzaddik*, righteous, can save a father and cause his *neshamah*, soul, to be taken out of *Gehinom*, Purgatory, even if the father was a *rasha*, evildoer. Therefore, I ask for myself – and all those who have

preceded me - that you perform the *mitzvos* with proper care, giving attention to maintaining yourself on an elevated level of propriety and ethical character, so that the labor of a lifetime will not go down the proverbial drain.

“What do I mean with the words ‘labor of a lifetime’?” The father pointed to a bridge that spanned the river. It was a large, solidly constructed bridge which served as the means for connecting two parts of the city, allowing for thousands of vehicles to cross it daily. “Do you see that bridge?” he asked. “Hundreds of people worked to construct that bridge. It took a few years of great effort exerted by many in order to provide us with this wonderful bridge. At the end of the job, the contractor presented the government with his bill. Our government is very astute. It will not pay for a commissioned job until it has been tested out. They must confirm that everything was executed in accordance with the plan and blueprint. Is the bridge strong? Will it last for many years? They test the bridge to see if it is able to bear the enormous weight of all the traffic that will traverse it daily. To this end, they bring a train pulling forty cars loaded with coal and run them across the bridge. If it withstands the test and all forty cars are able to make it across, - it is a success. If not...”

“This test is not only for money, for failure means there is no payment. It is also about pride and reputation. For some, failure can spell disaster. It took years developing their skill and reputation and, in the span of a few minutes, all could be all lost.

“And the test begins. One by one, the cars slowly make it onto the bridge. As each car rolls onto the bridge, the weight on it increases, and the suspense builds. Thirty cars have crossed – thirty one – two – three... finally the last car – number forty is slowly grinding its way up to the bridge. Knuckles are white, breathing is slowed almost to a halt; this is the moment that matters most. Will they leave successful, or will they leave with their heads bowed in defeat? The car reaches the middle of the bridge, and the bridge begins to tremble. Suddenly, with a loud crashing noise, the bridge crumbles under the weight, causing all forty cars to plunge into the river below. All of the toil exerted by the engineers, the technicians, the various laborers – all for naught. Instead of being crowned with laurels, they return home in shame and dejection.

“It is very much the same with the bridge that spans the generations, the chain that stretches back to *Sinai* and reaches all the way back to Avraham *Avinu*. Every one of our fathers, our ancestors, traversed that bridge of life. They passed the ultimate test by clinging to their beliefs and maintaining their convictions. I, too, will not live forever, and one day I will go the way of all men. I will have lived my life with conviction and observed Hashem’s Torah and *mitzvos*, despite the many challenges which I confronted. We – they and I - look to you to remain strong, to overcome the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, that is constantly presenting obstacles in our way. Remember, an error on your part affects not only your life, but the legacies, hopes and aspirations of all of us who preceded you. You are that last car that can make the difference between success and eternal failure.”