

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Re'eh

The opening verse of this week's parsha presents the people of Israel with a choice:

“See, I have placed before you on this day a blessing and a curse. The blessing: that you might heed the commandments of Hashem, your God, of which I am instructing you on this day. The curse: that you do not heed Hashem's commandments and you stray from the path which I am instructing you in...” (Devarim 11:26-28)

The stark binary described by Moshe Rabbeinu is clear. It is the very act of heeding God's word that is “a blessing;” it is the failure to do so which is called “a curse.”

Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno of Bologna (c. 1475-1550) remarks: “Let not your aspirations be constantly mediocre, as those of the majority are. For indeed: ‘I have placed before you on this day a blessing and a curse.’ These are the two extremes! ‘Blessing’ is success greater than what is strictly necessary, in the sense of exceeding good. ‘Curse’ is wretched malediction, which does not fulfill what is necessary. Both are before them, and they will achieve whichever they choose.” It is impossible to choose the path of mediocrity, which is in reality not a path at all.

Rabbi Gedalia Schorr (1910-1917) cites the Chovos haLevavos (R. Bahya ibn Paquda, c. 11th century CE) who states that all that one does on a daily basis can be characterized either as a mitzvah or aveirah, a good deed or a sin. R. Bahya elaborates: “The explanation of this matter is that anyone who does any action: if it is a mitzvah, then it is good; if he does not do it despite being able to, he has failed to

continued ...



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

perform the Creator's commandment. So too, one who transgresses is a sinner; if he does not transgress, he is a tzaddik (righteous man)--provided that he refrained from sinning out of fear of Hashem." He concludes: "Man's actions are divided between good and bad. The intelligent individual will weigh his actions upon this scale before he does them, checking them with the greatest [efforts] of his intellect and his abilities. He is to choose that which is good, and reject all else."

R. Schorr explains that it is this spirit which inspired Sforno's comment as well. It is always necessary to choose either the correct or incorrect path. Israel was not given the option of a middle path. To achieve success, it is necessary to constantly strive for the top. Anything less than our most strenuous effort is destined for certain failure.

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Asher Coleman

