

Shabbat Shalom Fax

Parshat Ki Tavo

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Insights into life, personal growth & Torah

21 Elul, 5782

The Fax of Life

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September 17, 2022

GOOD MORNING! In this week's column I recount two small incidents from the life of my beloved friend and mentor Rabbi Kalman Packouz, of blessed memory. These glimpses into the life of the good rabbi demonstrate not only his kind and gentle nature, but also his innate ability to impart timeless wisdom in a folksy and accessible manner. I chose these vignettes because they are particularly relevant to this week's Torah reading, which contains an all-encompassing Torah principle and a crucial life lesson.

Earlier in *Deuteronomy*, Moses instructs the Jewish people that when the Almighty brings them to the Land of Israel "*you shall place the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eival*" (*Deuteronomy 11:29*). In this week's reading the Torah delves into the exact process: Six of the tribes were to stand on Mount Gerizim to receive the blessings (Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin) and six were to stand on Mount Eival to receive the curses (Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naftali).

According to Rabbi Aryeh Kaplan these two mountains are found in the area that is known today as Samaria. Mount Gerizim is about one mile west of the city of Shechem (Nablus) and rises to 2849 feet high. Mount Eival is a sister mountain, rising to 3077 feet and is some two miles northeast of Mount Gerizim. Thus, the city of Shechem is located in the valley between Gerizim to the south and Eival to the north.

(At this point I must digress and point out the obvious cognate of the English word "evil" to the name of the mountain that hosted those representing the curses – Mount Eival. Even the word devil would seem related – but try as I might I could not track down a knowledgeable source that makes this connection.)

In this week's Torah reading we find a list of twelve curses that the priests (who stood between the two mountains) would call out to the entire nation. To each curse, the entire nation – the tribes on both mountains – would respond "Amen."

According to many Biblical commentaries the twelve curses are unique in that they refer to misdeeds that are committed in secret or privately (see Rabeinu Bachaya, Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and many others). This idea is typified by the first curse: "*Cursed is the person who sculpts or forms an idol, which is repulsive to God your Lord [...] and places it in a hidden place. All the nation shall respond and say Amen*" (*Deuteronomy 27:15*).

It behooves us to try and understand the general essence of the concept of blessings and curses, as well as why the curses here emphasize misdeeds that are done in private.

Of course, this subject of curses reminds of a joke; one which I have adapted in recognition of the start of the new NFL season this past week. Aside from the regular complement of games on Sunday, the NFL broadcasts games on Sunday nights, Monday nights, and Thursday nights – causing many to redefine the NFL acronym as standing for the "No Family League."

A man, who we will call Bob, is really excited for the "kickoff" of the NFL season on Thursday night and he settles into the couch after dinner while his wife Sally does something "inconsequential" like wash the dishes from supper, clean the kitchen, and prepare healthy lunches for the kids to take to school the next day. Naturally, Bob is oblivious.

After about 15 minutes he hears his wife calling from the kitchen, "Hey! Do you feel any sharp pain like from a voodoo curse?"

A little bewildered, Bob answers, "Uhhh, no."

After 5 minutes of silence: "What about now?"

As we have discussed in prior columns, the Almighty created the world with the intention of bestowing good on mankind. The ultimate good is an eternal relationship with the Almighty, which is the essence of the reward of the World to Come. This reward is earned through our good deeds and by following the path that the Almighty has laid out for mankind to follow. God is the source of all good and the connection to Him is what generates the good to flow towards man.

The Hebrew word for blessing is *bracha*. According to our sages, this refers to the "pool" (or *breicha* in Hebrew) from which we continuously draw down the source of good – the Almighty. When we are connected to that source we are able to continually benefit from it. Of course, when we are disconnected from the Almighty darkness descends and we experience the opposite – loneliness, pain, and suffering.

The sages in the Talmud (*Bava Kama 79b*) make a rather startling distinction between a mugger (who steals outright) and a thief (who sneaks into people's homes at night). The Torah punishes a thief more severely because, according to the Talmud, a thief is only afraid of being seen by people but is unconcerned with being "seen" by God – he says to himself that God is not present in this world: "*They said G-d will not see*" (*Psalms 94*).

Rabbi Meir illuminates the distinction between the two by quoting a parable in the name of Rabbi Gamliel: "It is comparable to two men who lived in a city and made a party. One invited the townspeople but not the family of the king, and one did not invite the townspeople nor the family of the king. Who will be punished more severely? The one who only values his relationship with the townspeople and disregards his relationship with the king."

Similarly, we find the first being cursed in the Torah was the snake in the Garden of Eden who sought to disconnect Adam and Eve from the Almighty. Compare this to God's blessing to Abraham (who's life mission sought to bring the awareness of the immanence of God to all of mankind), "*I will bless those that bless you [...] and all the families of the earth will be blessed through you*" (Genesis 12:3). In other words, it is through that connection to the presence of the Almighty that all of earth's inhabitants will be blessed.

This is why the twelve curses in this week's Torah reading are preoccupied with misdeeds that one does in secret; just as with the thief, it betrays one's belief that he can exist in a world that is unseen by God. The twelfth and final curse underscores this concept: "*Cursed is he that does not uphold and keep this entire Torah [...]*" (27:26).

The famous medieval sage of the 13th century known as Nachmanides makes some extraordinary remarks on this last curse. He points out that the Torah doesn't say cursed is someone who doesn't **perform** the entire Torah, instead it says one who doesn't **uphold** it. Therefore, Nachmanides says that it refers to someone who refuses to confirm the veracity of the entire Torah – a person that denies any part of it.

By contrast, Nachmanides continues, a person who violates a commandment because he cannot control himself (e.g. eating pork) or because he is just plain lazy (e.g. he doesn't bother to take a *lulav* on the holiday of *sukkot*) does not fall under the category of the cursed. This is because the person isn't rejecting God or the Torah and its principles, but rather is succumbing to a human frailty – a failing of self-control and discipline. It's not an overt act against God.

Nachmanides then says something truly astonishing: Even if a person is purely righteous and faithfully fulfills all of the commandments in the Torah and he has studied and kept the Torah, if he has the opportunity to influence others who are not yet keeping the Torah (either by enabling them to study it or by strengthening the uninitiated in their fulfillment of the Torah) and he fails to help others to uphold the Torah, then he too is in the category of the cursed. Meaning, everyone has a responsibility to see that others have the same opportunities to connect to the Almighty.

I would like to share two brief incidents from the life of our beloved friend and teacher Rabbi Kalman Packouz, of blessed memory.

Working at Aish HaTorah in the 1970's and 80's meant constantly mentoring new students, the vast majority of whom had very little Jewish education or Torah knowledge. In addition, being located in the Old City of Jerusalem, the good rabbi had daily opportunities to meet new people and share impromptu rabbinic teachings. One time a tourist stopped him and asked, "Where can I buy a *mezuzah*?" Rabbi Packouz escorted the man to a nearby shop, where the man picked out a few dozen beautiful mezuzah cases, then went to the checkout to pay.

"**These** cases are only to protect the scroll inside," Rabbi Packouz said. "What about the scrolls?"

"**I don't** need the scrolls," the man replied. "I'm not that religious."


Rabbi Packouz responded gently: "We sometimes say, 'I'm not religious,' when we really mean, 'I'm not fully observant.' Everyone is at least somewhat observant – helping the needy, honoring parents, and living ethically. Judaism is not 'all or nothing.' In fact, even the most committed Jew doesn't always succeed. Each of us is somewhere on the path, hopefully ascending."

In a similar vein, a student once despaired, "I feel like it's all or nothing! I feel like I either have to do all the commandments or none!" The good rabbi answered with a metaphor: "If you discover a diamond mine then eventually you'll want to dig up every last one, even if you can't carry them all right now. Judaism wants us to grow in knowledge and observance. Do your best, the Almighty only asks that we do our best."

TORAH PORTION: Ki Tavo, Deuteronomy 26:1 – 29:8

This week's portion includes: Bringing to the Temple as an offering the first fruits of the seven species special to the Land of Israel, declaration of tithes, the Almighty designating the Jewish people as His treasured people (*Deuteronomy* 26:16 - 19), the command to set up in the Jordan River and then on Mount Eival large stones that had the Torah written upon them in 70 languages, the command to have a public ratification of the acceptance of the law from Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival; the Torah then sets forth the blessings for following the law and the curses for not following it, and concludes with Moses' final discourse. Verse 28:46 tells us the importance of serving the Almighty with "joy and a good heart." The last verse of the portion instructs us, "You shall fulfill the words of this covenant and do them so that you will succeed in all that you do!"

SHABBAT LIGHTING: *Jerusalem* 6:08 *Miami* 7:05 *Cape Town* 6:20 *Guatemala* 5:44 *Hong Kong* 6:08 *Honolulu* 6:15

 *Jo'Burg* 5:43 *LA* 6:39 *London* 6:57 *Melbourne* 5:53 *Mexico* 7:20 *Moscow* 6:26 *New York* 6:45 *Singapore* 6:44 *Toronto* 7:07

"QUOTE OF THE WEEK": Until someone knows how much you care, they don't care how much you know.

— Theodore Roosevelt

Dedicated with Deep Appreciation to
Michael & Shelley Eizelman



Shabbat Shalom,

Yitzchak Zweig

Rabbi Yitzchak Zweig

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