

## It's A Matter of Perspective

Earlier this year I needed to buy some new glasses, but my prescription was outdated and I was told that before I can order new glasses I needed to go get examined. So, I went to my eye doctor for an exam and the optometrist in his office checked my eyesight. I was complaining that I couldn't see too clearly out of the right lens because it was all scratched up. After the exam he explained that it wasn't an issue with the scratches, but my vision had changed, and I needed a new prescription.

Sure enough, when I put on my new glasses with the updated prescription it was like seeing the world in High Definition. Everything was crystal clear.

Just like going to the optometrist for an eye exam and getting a new prescription, sometimes we need help to examine our lives and make sure we are looking at the world through the right lenses by having the right perspective.

Our parsha Re'eh begins with the pasuk (Devarim 11:26) – **רְאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה**: *See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse.*

Moshe begins this parsha by putting the commandments into perspective, saying that the choice of whether or not to accept the Torah in its totality is nothing less than the choice between blessing and curse, light and darkness, life and death.

Two stark paths are laid out before B'nai Yisrael: specific blessings for obeying the Torah's commandments and specific curses if they disobey.

Moshe therefore instructs us later on in parshas Nitzavim (30:19) to choose the path of bracha, to *Choose life!* – **וּבְחַרְתָּ בַּחַיִּים**.

The Gemara in Eruvin (53b) illustrates this idea with an interaction between Rabbi Yehoshua ben Chananya and a young boy he met on the road.

Rabbi Yehoshua said: One time I was walking along the path, and I saw a young boy sitting at the crossroads. And I said to him: On which path shall I walk in order to get to the city?

He said to me: "This path is short, but long, and that path is long, but short".

I walked on the path that was short, but long. When I approached the city, I found that gardens and orchards surrounded it, but I did not know the trails leading through them to the city.

I went back and met the young boy again and said to him: My son, didn't you tell me that this way is short?

He said to me: And didn't I tell you that it is also long?

The Gemara concludes with Rabbi Yehoshua kissing the boy on his head and saying to him: Happy are you, O Israel, for you are all exceedingly wise, from your old to your young.

In life, there is a "short, but long way" and a "long, but short way".

The Torah and its mitzvos are Hashem's blueprint for creation, detailing the exact manner in which He meant life to be lived and His purpose in creation to be fulfilled.

There is the "short, but long way". As the most direct and simple line between two points, it is misleadingly the surest way to town; but in truth, the direct approach is a dead end. As with the route which Rabbi Yehoshua first chose, it seems to lead straight to the city — only somehow it never quite makes it. On the short, but long road, one may win battle after battle, but there is never a decisive victory in the war of life.

On the other hand, the "long, but short way" is winding, steep, tedious, and long as life itself. It is full of ups and downs, setbacks, and frustrations. It demands every ounce of intellectual and emotional stamina a human being can muster. But it is a road that leads, steadily and surely, to the aspired-to destination. When one does finally acquire an aptitude and intellectual taste for the G-dly, when one does develop a desire for good and abhorrence for evil, the war has been won. The person has transformed himself into someone whose every thought, deed and act are naturally attuned to his quintessential self and purpose in life.

Part of achieving our purpose in life is recognizing how our actions impact the entire world. Our pasuk starts off with the word רְאֵה – *See* – as singular, but a few words later the word לְפָנֶיךָ – *before you* – is plural. The Kli Yakar teaches that a person must always view things as if the entire world is half righteous and half wicked. If he performs a single *mitzvah*, he tips himself and the entire world to the side of merit. Therefore, Moshe spoke to every individual, that he should רְאֵה – *See* – in his thought that every single action affects the entire world.

The Malbim explains this verse to mean that blessing and curse are not simply promises for the future. One can actually see that people who observe the Torah have a sense of accomplishment, fulfillment, and spiritual growth. The blessing is there for all to see.

Moshe points out that B'nai Yisrael are not like other nations. The blessings promised them are so far out of the ordinary as to be miraculous, the Sforno says, and so are the ordeals facing them if they fail in their spiritual calling. Thus, the choice is between blessing and curse.

B'nai Yisrael are destined for greatness and cannot settle for middle of the road, mediocrity, or half-hearted efforts. Moshe urged B'nai Yisrael to strive for great heights and that they should feel the alternative is nothing less than a curse.

Rabbi Yechiel Spero shares an explanation from the sefer Doresh L'tziyon by Rabbi Bentzion Mutzafi. He says, imagine you go to the doctor for a wellness visit.

The doctor says, "You have a problem with your circulation, you have a problem with your heart, and you have a problem with your lungs".

And you say, "Yeah, how are my kidneys and ears working?"

And he says, "Well, they're working fine."

You say, "Great! Super!"

The doctor looks at you like you are out of your mind. "Don't you get it? You can't have these three critical parts of your health not working well. You certainly can't be happy about it".

The same is true with mitzvos. A friend of mine likes to say that we all have our own deals with G-d. We do this mitzvah, but not that one... When really, we would benefit to move beyond our comfort zone of doing just the mitzvos we're comfortable with. Hashem makes the choice very clear, bracha or *klalah*, blessing or curse, life or death. There is no middle ground.

The Baal HaTurim offers several explanations for the way our pasuk starts off:

רָאָה אֶנֶכִּי - *See, I* – Moshe used the singular verb here meaning that the command to **See** was said to each person individually, even though the rest of the verse is stated in the plural. In other words, B'nai Yisrael have individual obligations to make the right decision and follow the Torah for themselves without putting the responsibility solely on others to do.

The Gemara Taanis (11a) teaches that at a time when the nation as a whole is suffering, a person should not turn away and just say that everything is fine and good in his own life. If he does act this way, with little regard for the suffering around him, he will not merit taking part in the nation's consolation.

Every single individual is being spoken to with this message as if Hashem were saying, "Whether I give the nation blessings or I give them curses, you should see yourself as taking part with them and not separate yourself from them."

We find a similar example in Gemara Sanhedrin (111a) where Rav Yochanan says that one individual can bring merit to an entire city, and two family members can bring merit to the entire family.

The Zera Shimshon teaches that the pasuk's structure is to remind us that the act of the individual helps the entire congregation, and that sometimes, when one person fulfills mitzvos properly, everyone in the nation receives blessing in his merit (אוֹת א').

The Baal HaTurim goes on to say that רָאָה אֶנֶכִּי - *See, I* – means, "**See** the Ten Commandments, which begin with the word אֶנֶכִּי (*Anochi*), and fulfill them, for all the mitzvos are included within them."

The Ataros Addar suggests that this comment is to be understood in accordance with the Midrash: When Hashem uttered the Ten Commandments, He modulated His voice to accommodate each person according to his ability to hear and assimilate Hashem's words.

Numerous Rishonim and Acharonim wrote *piyutim*, or *Azharos*, as they are called, encapsulating all the 613 mitzvos. Earliest known *Azharos* are mentioned by the Gaonim and were said during Musaf on Shavuot.

Rav Saadiah Gaon wrote an *Azharos* that relates each of the 613 mitzvos to the *Aseret Hadibrot*, categorizing them according to the Ten Commandments.

One other interpretation the Baal HaTurim has is that רָאָה אֶנֶכִּי - *See, I* – implies Moshe saying, "**See me**, i.e., observe me and emulate my example."

The constant awareness that we are living in Hashem's presence might have been easy for Moshe, but how can we emulate him?

The Yefeh To'ar (Eshed HaNechalim) interprets the word רָאָה - *See*- refers not to literal seeing with the eyes, but to contemplating and reflecting.

Every one of us contains a spark of Moshe. This little bit of Moshe Rabbeinu within us is our innate ability to reach profound levels of Divine consciousness. Possessing this inner spark enables us all to contemplate upon Hashem's presence within the world and His being absolutely beyond the world, and thereby awaken ourselves to a profound awareness of His presence.

Even though we may not be able to sustain this awareness constantly, the depth of its impression upon us when we contemplate it profoundly makes it available to us to reawaken this awareness again.

The Or HaChaim writes that Moshe had something else in mind when he said רָאָה אֲנֹכִי. He meant it as if saying, "look at me!" The Rambam explains in *Hilchos Teshuvah* (chap. 5) that every person has the potential to become the equal of Moshe.

This is precisely what Moshe meant. He said, "Take a good look at me! Everything that I have accomplished you are able to accomplish for yourselves!"

Whenever a person aspires to serve Hashem, he is to train his sights on those who have achieved more than himself and use this as a challenge to set his spiritual sights ever higher.

Life often happens at the edges of our comfort zones. When we are able to cross that self-imposed border into uncomfortable, but productive territory we are expanding our domains in good ways. One step at a time, one inch at a time, one moment at a time. If we take on too much too soon, we falter and fail. But if we systematically identify and internalize positive steps and take them one by one, we can soar.

Rabbi Avi Slansky presented the following beautiful *mashal* (parable). Fireflies give off a tiny, but beautiful light. That little spark is nice, but doesn't do too much. It catches your attention for a moment, but doesn't light up the road you're walking on.

That's what often happens with *chizuk*, inspiration, a good thought, that's all it does for us - it's a little light. A beautiful light, but then it flies away and it's gone.

But then there's the person that takes that bottle and catches a firefly. And if he catches one firefly, he always has a little bit of light. It goes on and off illuminating every few seconds. That's the person that hears something and it makes a little bit of difference, a teeny bit of light.

Then there's the person that catches a second, a third, 10, 20, 30 fireflies in one jar. Then what happens is a different firefly is lighting up each moment. And before you know it, that jar is radiating. The jar is actually giving off light.

That's what we can do if we take all the *chizuk*, all the inspiration, all the good thoughts and not necessarily make tremendous changes in our life, but make a lot of teeny tiny changes. That

little firefly was so inconsequential, but when it's added together with another, and another, and another - slowly it starts radiating.

Perhaps it's time to take all the chizuk, all the inspiration, all that we see which is good and start to let it settle and make a difference, especially now that we're approaching the month of Elul.

Maybe once a day try to take something that you hear and make a difference with it. Then slowly after time, it can be twice a day. Then, before we realize it, it's become a habit, a good habit. Slowly over time we can change.

If we make those little changes, we can then see the big results.

The Kotzker Rebbe said that the hole of a needle is tiny, but it is a hole made of iron. We can make commitments, resolutions that are as small as a hole of a needle, but they are concrete. They don't budge.

When we make the right changes, then we will be able to see that even the curses in our life are tailor-made for each one of us as concealed blessings, ready for us to peel back the darkness and uncover the light of the *bracha*.

The word הַיּוֹם – *today* – in our verse teaches that only today, i.e., when the punishment is first imposed, is it seen and described as a curse. As time goes on and the adversity spurs one to repent, it will become clear that the curse is ultimately a blessing.

The Sfas Emes (Re'eh 5631) finds a similar allusion in the phrase בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה – *a blessing "and" a curse* – which might have been worded *a blessing "or" a curse*. The combining force of the conjunction "*and*" bridges the gap between these seemingly opposite influences, indicating that in this context, they are essentially one, for Hashem's curse is nothing but a blessing in disguise.

A Divine curse is actually a blessing that is too great to be revealed within our limited world and must therefore be "*disguised*" as a curse. Our challenge is to see it in this perspective, rather than falling into the trap of becoming angry with Hashem.

Our pasuk teaches a cause and effect relationship between the act and its reward. From "*today*" onward, the keys to reward and punishment will be in your hands, for good or evil will now come as a natural and automatic consequence of every good or bad deed.

The Mishna teaches in Pirkei Avos (4:13), *He who fulfills a mitzvah gains himself an advocate* – the mitzvah itself becomes a force for his well-being, a protector in his time of need – while *he who commits a transgression gains himself an accuser* – an adversary that will exact retribution for the evil he has perpetrated.

The Midrash Rabbah (Re'eh 5) asks what בְּרָכָה (blessing) was Moshe referring to in our pasuk?

The Midrash answers that Hashem was saying here, "Listen to Me, for no person ever listens to Me and loses out as a result." The בְּרָכָה (blessing) of our pasuk refers to the fact that when one follows Hashem's command, no harm will befall him even in a situation in which following Hashem's word *appears* to run counter to one's benefit (Radal).

The blessing is not referring to the substantial ultimate reward in store for one who obeys Hashem's commands, but to the simple fact that when a person follows Hashem's word his actions will bring him no harm (Yefeh To'ar).

Rabbi Aharon Bakst presents a deeper perspective that this assurance from Hashem guarantees not only reaching the eventual destination, but it guarantees the positive nature of the journey as well.

One's independent navigation through life's many challenges is beset with doubtful efforts that draw him deeper into distress and further from his goal. Not so with the one who "listens to Me" – he does not lose. He takes each step with the knowledge that he is progressing along the path that Hashem has charted for him.

Come what may, he is headed toward the goal that Hashem has set for him. This is the ultimate definition of *good* – that both one's journey and destination are *good*.

He takes each step with sureness and confidence. To one who listens to Hashem, there can be no loss and there can be no greater בְּרָכָה (blessing).

Chapter 14 in our parsha begins, בְּנִים אַתֶּם לַה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם (14:1) - *You are children to Hashem, your G-d*. Ibn Ezra expounds that once we understand that *we are children to Hashem*, and He loves us more than a father loves his child, then everything that He does for us is for the best. And this is so even if we do not understand it, just as small children sometimes do not understand the actions of their father, but rely on him nonetheless — we should ourselves act likewise, trust Hashem, and *listen to Him*.

This is one of my favorite concepts – every single one of us is a child of Hashem. The relationship is direct and One-to-one. It's not that my father, I, and my son are son, grandson, and great-grandson to Hashem. *Each one of us is His son*.

To me, this is such a powerful idea. Hashem is never too far away – He's not some distant cousin twice removed, great-uncle, or ancestor relegated to the family tree. Rather, He is our *Father*, the closest, most direct relationship of parent and child.

With the right perspective we can recognize and strengthen our relationship with Hashem, *our Father*, and feel closer to Him. Those who leave everything in Hashem's hands, will eventually see Hashem's hand in everything.

Imagine finding one small way, one minor gesture to become closer to Hashem in our day to day lives. How would that feel?

I am committing to saying *Modeh Ani* with more *kevanah* (concentration) when I wake up rather than half-heartedly mumbling the words, so that I start my day off with the right perspective.

Please let me know if you are able to think of one small change that could bring you closer to Hashem. I am interested to hear about it.

What small steps can we take to stay on the right path for a life of bracha and goodness?