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by Rabbi Yaakov Finestone

Sponsored l'iluy nishmas Moshe Shimon ben Dov Berish z"l whose yearzeit was on the 15th of Elul

BLESSINGS OR CURSES – YOU CHOOSE!

PARSHAS NITZAVIM-VAYELECH

The Chofetz Chaim was once overheard speaking to Hashem, "Master of the Universe, You have done so much for me already. I have written the Sefer Shmiras HaLashon. I have written the Mishneh Berura. What can I do for you?"

If we would have written the Mishneh Berura, most likely our attitude might have been, "Look, Hashem, I wrote the Mishneh Berura. I made Orach Chaim understandable! I resuscitated the mitzvah of Guarding One's Tongue. Now do something special for me."

The Chofetz Chaim looked at his achievements from a totally different perspective. He felt that it was a privilege for him to have been given the opportunity by Hashem to write these monumental sefarim. Now he wanted to know what he could do to show his appreciation to Hashem.

This is how we should feel when Hashem showers us with His blessings. (Rabbi Frand on the Parashah 3 by Rabbi Yissocher Frand)

This week's parsha begins, "You are standing, this day, all of you before Hashem...." (Devarim 29:12). The previous parsha lists 98 curses of what will happen if the Jewish People sin against Hashem. Our sages teach us that

"When it happens that there come upon you... the blessing and the curse that I have set before you.... You will return to Hashem and listen to His voice...." (Devarim 30:1-2)

when two topics are next to each other in the Torah, it is to teach us a lesson. **Rashi** quotes a **Midrash** that explains the connection and association between this parsha and the parsha that preceded it. The Midrash explains that when the Jewish People heard the ninety-eight curses, in addition to the previous forty-nine curses that are listed in sefer Vayikra (26:14....), their faces turned green. They were horrified lest they be incapable of living up to the standards demanded by the Torah. They said to Moshe, "Who can possibly withstand all these punishments?!" In response, Moshe calmed and reassured them, "See, you are standing today before Hashem!"

Moshe was telling them that even though they had angered Hashem a number of times, Hashem had not annihilated them.

Moshe calmed the Jewish People, telling them that Hashem gave them the Torah only for their benefit. Moshe reassured them

that despite their terrible sins they were still all standing here today. Hashem did not wipe them out! Hashem loves the Jewish People!

Moshe said that the curses and the sufferings gave the Jewish People permanence and stability (נצבים) before Hashem. What does that mean? **Sifsei Chachamim** explains that the long list of curses produces a fear which helps dissuade the Jews from sinning. The list of curses is a tool to encourage the Jews to soar to great heights. And if the Jews would sin, the punishments that result from the curses would cleanse the Jewish People so that they will live "forever", in *Olam Haba*, the World to Come (see Talmud Avodas Zara 4A).

Later in the parsha, the Torah says, *“When it happens that there come upon you... the blessing and the curse that I have set before you....You will return to Hashem and listen to His voice....”* (Devarim 30:1-2)

The pasuk says that BOTH the blessings and the curses will inspire the Jews to reflect on their actions and repent, bringing them closer to Hashem. It is logical that one who is undergoing much suffering often turns to pray to Hashem. The terrible things that are happening agitate him. The suffering motivates him to examine his ways, to repent and come closer to Hashem.

However, how do we understand how blessings can inspire one to do *teshuvah*, repentance?

The **Shach** (quoted in Talelei Oros by Rabbi Yissachar Dov Rubin) explains that the contrast from the prior blessings to the present curses is what prompts the introspection leading to repentance. When the Jews are exiled, initially they will experience a period of blessing. That will be followed by a period of curses and suffering. The Jews will then understand that the curses only came because they didn't appreciate the blessings when they had them. The blessings corrupted them and caused them to abandon the Torah. Thus, the combination of the blessings and the curses served to bring the Jewish People closer to Hashem.

The **Shemen HaTov** (quoted by Rabbi Yissocher Frand in Rabbi Frand on the Parashah 3) gives a different explanation. The Shemen HaTov says that

sometimes blessings, on their own, can be a reason for a person to repent. If everything is going so well, that should inspire a person to do *teshuvah*. A person should ask himself, “Why are things going so well? Is it because I am a righteous person or is it because Hashem is being very gracious to me. Maybe I should improve my ways.”

I have another, slightly different answer. When we stop and think about how much Hashem does for us, that strengthens our love for Hashem. We become so overwhelmed with love of Hashem that we want to come closer to Hashem who showers such love on us. This makes us want to do *teshuvah* and improve our ways. Focusing on all the good, all the kindness and love that Hashem does shower upon us will also help us during the times that we are struggling with challenges.

“When all these things come upon you, the Blessing and the Curse.” **The Shemen HaTov** says that it is really up to us to decide what our motivation will be to repent. If one reacts amidst blessings and says that Hashem is so good to him that he must repay Hashem by being better and repenting, then he may be able to repent before ever having to suffer the curses. We beseech Hashem that our “wake up call” come through kindness even when we are not behaving right and perhaps deserve to be punished. We may be inspired to *teshuvah* through Blessing or Curse. We ask Hashem to use the method of Blessing. Hopefully that will suffice to help us to achieve proper repentance.

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Rabbi Yaakov Finestone is the director of JEP Queens. For almost 50 years JEP Queens has been in the forefront of kiruv. JEP has changed the lives of thousands of Jewish children enrolled in public schools and kiruv schools. Many are shomrei Torah and mitzvos today because of JEP.

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