

Drasha Parashat Re'eh 5766

Imagine you're driving on the highway, and you reach a point where the road splits. (As I have begun to learn, here in the Boston area, this happens quite a lot.) Both options will get you to your destination—but you must choose between them. On one side, traffic is flowing smoothly. There's even a sign that reads: "Tunnel open." The sign marking your other option reads: "Construction ahead. Expect delays." Not a difficult decision.

Our parasha this week opens with a choice that appears to be much like this one, the choice between blessing and curse. We read of Moshe offering the people these options. Like a teacher, Moshe describes to Israel the consequences of their actions. If they follow God's ways, the מצוות in which Moshe has been instructing them, they will be blessed. However, if they stray from God's path, and choose idolatry, they will be cursed.

This seems fairly straightforward. Do the right thing and you'll be blessed; mess up—and you'll be cursed. And just to be clear, the wrong path is idolatry. Don't take it. There's a clear preference for choosing the path of blessing. It's almost as though Moshe's words

amount to God giving us a freebie, explicitly directing us toward the right path, toward blessing. It couldn't be more explicit.

Or could it?

When describing this choice, a midrash makes use of a parable much like the one I began with this morning. A person reaches a fork in the road. But instead of being clearly marked by signs, the road of blessing is covered in brambles and thorn bushes, while the road of curse is clear and open. Although the conditions of the roads switch a ways down—changing to match their respective destinies, it is impossible to tell which one is the right one at the point where they diverge.

This parable, I believe, more closely matches the choice which Moshe presented to the people of Israel. The blessings and curses which begin our parasha are tied to the sin of idolatry, of straying not just from God's way, but from God. And listed among the laws in our parasha that comprise the right path are a number of cases that are not as clear cut we would have expected. Take, for example, the case of the false prophet.

We read in Deuteronomy, 13, beginning in verse 2 (p. 1068): "If there appears among you a prophet or dream-diviner and he gives

you a sign or a portent, saying, ‘Let us follow and worship another god,’ even if the sign or portent the he named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner...”

Traditional commentators pay careful attention to the wording of this exhortation and point out the murkiness of the situation. The Torah calls this person a prophet, נביא, a dream diviner—חולם חלום. Both prophecy and dreams are methods through which God communicates with *legitimate* prophets. These signs that the prophet employs to prove his legitimacy—אֹתוֹת and מוֹפְתִים—are the very same kinds of signs *legitimate* prophets use to prove their divine source. They are how the prophet gains the trust of his audience. In fact, the Torah uses the same word—אֹתוֹת—when it describes the signs Moshe used to convince the enslaved people of Israel that they should follow him, a prophet of the God they did not yet know.

You see the dilemma.

If the path of curses looks just like the path of blessing, how can we possibly be expected to choose between them?

In this case, the decision requires careful consideration and good instincts. Even in such an extreme situation, the right answer may not be cut and dry. When an acknowledged prophet comes

along and encourages you to do something thoroughly out of whack with your values—say abandon the true God for foreign deities—you might have to think about it for a minute and consider if this person's prophetic voice is still valid. You would also have to listen to your kishkes. There have been a couple of notable times in our tradition when a true prophet comes along and instructs the people to do something totally against their values system, shockingly conveying God's wishes for the people. Eliyahu ha-navi, Elijah, during his encounter with the prophets of Ba'al, *after the Temple had already been built*, rallied the people to offer a sacrifice not at the altar in Jerusalem, God's sacred dwelling, but at Mount Carmel. Not only did the people wholeheartedly agree to this, but it turned out that this was an important act in the fight *against* idolatry.

The greater question being posed by our parasha today is: How do we know who to trust when faced with a complex situation? We deal with this question constantly, both on a communal level, and on a personal one. As a community, these are issues we currently face as we follow the distressing events in Israel. What news service do we listen to? Can we wade through all the bias to get at the real story? Knowing that photographers often use enhancement software

in preparing their photos for publication, do we pay any attention to the photographic coverage of events in the middle east? We struggle to choose a lens through which to view these events that mean so much to us. Ultimately, we have to make a decision and follow the news, or else go on a permanent “news diet,” and remain totally oblivious to the goings on in Israel. In our personal lives, an example that readily comes to mind is medicine. We trust our doctors with our lives, with the lives of our families. We have to believe in their ability to heal us in order to put ourselves in their hands. We have faith in their medical training, in their expertise, and we follow their instructions because they are our doctors. But as patients, we also allow ourselves a certain measure of caution and vigilance when it comes to how we listen to them. We have the right, the responsibility, to have their diagnoses confirmed, to seek second opinions. Were we to offer our doctors our uncritical trust, we might miss out on the benefit of an illuminating differing view. Were we not to trust our doctors at all, we would neither ask their advice, nor seek treatment, and possibly suffer greatly. The goal, in both of these situations, is to strike a balance between trusting no one at all, even the trustworthy, and bestowing our undying devotion on someone

undeserving. We strive to strike a balance between being sure of the right thing to do, and being willing to accept the consequences if, despite our certainty, we make the wrong decision.

And what are the consequences, what is the curse that comes from choosing to follow the false prophet into idolatry? The Torah indicates that choosing idolatry is choosing to go back into slavery. At the end of this passage, we are reminded that God “freed us from the land of Egypt and redeemed us from the house of bondage.” (13:6) If choosing God is choosing the blessing of freedom, then abandoning God is choosing to be enslaved anew. Another midrash drives this point home. “To what can this situation be compared?” it asks. “To a master who said to his slave: ‘Here, wear this gold necklace. And if you refuse it, you will instead wear these iron chains.’”

So choosing the right path both brings us blessing and affirms our freedom. This freedom is not the freedom from having to make such decisions; it is the freedom that grants us the ability to struggle with these blurry options, to choose autonomously, and to live with the results of our choices.

It is told that when Israel stood at הר סיני, Mount Sinai, God gave them the Torah. From that moment, which affirmed our freedom from slavery and marked us as a nation of God, whenever someone would sin or make a mistake, God would hold that person accountable for his or her actions. This was a momentous event in the history of our people—the freedom to make difficult choices, to decide how to behave as people of God, brought with it the responsibility to accept the end results of those decisions.

This week, we will welcome the month of Elul, in which we begin to contemplate such choices—both those we have made over the past year, and those we anticipate making in the coming one.

This process is known as חשבון הנפש, taking account of our souls. As we prepare for a new year, we look forward to the opportunity to begin that year squared with ourselves, with God, and with our loved ones. חשבון הנפש, and its partner, תשובה, repentance, require that we honestly evaluate our deeds and our relationships, that we take responsibility for our past actions, and that we seek out forgiveness from those we have hurt. This period of introspection allows us to look back at our year, at the paths that we chose, and to see where they led. It is an opportunity not only to come to terms

with our mistakes, but also to rejoice when we have overcome obstacles, or made good decisions.

For our sages who have pondered this practice, the idea of our ability to determine our own actions is one of its essential components. Maimonides, in his Laws of Teshuvah, interprets the opening verse of our parasha to make this point. ראה. “Behold, I set before you today blessing and curse.” The power to choose which path to take is in our hands. Anything that is possible for a person to do, she may do, whether it is for good or for evil. God does not force us down either path. God offers us the choice; ultimately, it is we who make it.

If we look back now to the beginning of our parasha, ראה אנכי גותן, לפניכם היום, we can understand it a little differently. Although we all wish to take the path of blessing, it is not always obvious which one it is. As free people who strive to follow God’s ways, we have been given the gift of figuring it out for ourselves. Today, as we stand poised on the edge of the month of Elul, we begin our preparations for the New Year. Engaging in honest השבון הנפש is not an easy exercise. It requires us to evaluate the choices we have made and accept responsibility for how things turned out. Examining our

actions over the past year, we can learn from our mistakes, and also celebrate the opportunity to make new choices, to face the fork in the road again, and choose the path that leads to blessing. As we look forward to this season of introspection and new beginnings, may we all find the coming year to be filled with such blessing.

Shabbat Shalom.