

The Inner Landscape of the Blessing and the Curse

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Abstract: We all have the power to choose our outlook on life. We choose to see the cup as half-full or half-empty. We choose whether or not to see the silver lining in every cloud. We can choose to curse the darkness or we can choose to bless the light. We can choose to see daily life as a blessing or we can choose to see daily life as a curse.

Let's learn Torah together. The Torah portion for this Shabbat, from the Book of Deuteronomy, is called *Ki tavo*.

To celebrate and mark the Hebrews' imminent arrival in the land of Israel, Moses described to them four special ceremonies they are to fulfill upon finally entering the promised land. Let's learn about one of these rituals (Deuteronomy 27:12-13):

“After you have crossed the Jordan, the following shall stand on Mount Gerizim when the blessing for the people is spoken: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin. And for the curse, the following shall stand on Mount Ebal: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naftali.”

So what is the ritual exactly?

Six tribes will ascend Mt. Gerizim and pronounce blessings upon the people. Six tribes will ascend Mt. Ebal and pronounce curses upon the people.

What do you think is the purpose of this ritual?

The purpose is to establish new norms of behavior for the people in the Promised Land. These behaviors will bring you blessing. These behaviors will bring down a curse upon you. The objective is to create a model society.

Now this narrative from the book of Deuteronomy literally refers to two places, to a geographic landscape. What if we were to interpret this passage as a metaphor? What could it refer to? What could it mean? What if we were to understand Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal as two places within our inner, psychological landscape? The two mountains could symbolize the internalized voices we carry with us through our lives. Mt. Gerizim symbolizes a warm and loving voice we hear within our heads. It is the inner voice of blessing. It is the voice that reassures us we do not have to be perfect to be loved. It is the voice that encourages us to forgive and be reconciled with others. It is the voice that reminds us to savor the small pleasures of everyday life. Mt. Ebal represents a cold and unloving voice we hear within our heads. It is the inner voice of curse. It is the voice that

demands perfection from us no matter the cost. It is the critical voice that deprives us of any joy or satisfaction in life. It is the unforgiving voice that pushes our loved ones away and refuses to bury old grudges.

Two inner voices: Mt. Gerizim, the voice of blessing and Mt. Ebal, the voice of curse. Which voice do you hear in your head most of the time? Sadly, some of us hear mostly – even only -- the voice of curse and criticism.

How do we help ourselves to hear the voice of blessing all the time or at least most of the time? We can answer that question by noticing where Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal are located. Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal face each other on opposite sides of the city of Shechem. As Rabbi Raphael Samson Hirsch pointed out, this means that both mountains possess the same soil and are watered by the same rainfall.

Rabbi Hirsch asks, if this is the case how is it possible that Mt. Ebal is barren and bleak, while Mt. Gerizim is lush and green? Then, being a typical Rabbi, Rabbi Hirsch proceeds to answer his own question. He teaches, “It is up to each one of us to decide whether we will promote blessing or curse in our own life.”

In other words, we all have the power to choose our outlook on life. We choose to see the cup as half full or half-empty. We choose whether or not to see the silver lining in every cloud. We can choose to curse the darkness or we can choose to bless the light. We can choose to see daily life as a blessing. We can choose to see daily life as a curse.

I once overheard someone say from the seat in front of me on the train, “You know, it doesn’t matter what the weather is like outside. I bring my own weather with me wherever I go.”

As we quickly move toward the New Year of 5770, may you choose to hear only the voice of blessing in your head. In this New Year, may you bring your own weather with you wherever you go. In this New Year, may you always be among those who -- given the choice to curse the darkness or bless the light -- always choose to bless the light.