

In this week's portion we learn from the very first verse about choice and blessings; we can choose how we live our lives and, by making the right choice according to Judaism, we can be blessed by God.

We all think we know what it means to be blessed, that something positive has happened to us. Right? There is a *hassidisher* story that talks about this very thing. And it gives us a very different answer. It's about *Reb Zusya*, an early 19<sup>th</sup> century *hassid*.

A man asked the brother of *Reb Zusya*, 'How is it possible to bless God for bad news with equal fervor as for good news?'

'Go to the study hall and ask your question to my brother, the saintly *Reb Zusya*.'

When the man laid his eyes on *Reb Zusya*, he could easily imagine the suffering he must have experienced in his lifetime. The pain of illness and poverty were etched on his face. The man went up to him and said, 'How is it possible to bless God for bad news with equal fervor as for good news?'

*Reb Zusya's* reply: "Why are you asking me? How do I know the answer? Nothing bad has ever happened to me!"

How much *Reb Zusya* benefited was not his definition of a blessing. Even with all the pain and illness he had suffered, he experienced his life as blessed.

Another story is a much more current version of how to define a blessing.

There's a woman who constantly complains about everything. She is especially angry with her daughter-in-law who, she claims, frivolously spends her son's hard earned money. 'He has to bring her breakfast in bed and take her out to eat all the time!' This same woman is full of praise for her 'wonderful son-in-law' who brings her daughter breakfast in bed and takes her out to eat all the time!

We can easily see how blessings and curses can be seen differently in different circumstances. It would certainly be best for each of us to be like *Reb Zusya*, to look upon everything as a blessing but let's face it, we are more like the woman. We experience gaining something as a blessing and losing something as a curse. In addition we are more likely to focus our attention on the blessings done to us and not so much on the blessings we do for others.

Our Torah teaches us how to understand a blessing in a way that is not relative. In fact it's very clear cut.

According to Jewish law, a blessing is an act of righteousness and a curse is an act of wickedness. Here's how God created this system.

*Midrash Breishit Rabbah* tells us how God chose good over evil.

At the beginning of the world's creation, God beheld the deeds of the righteous and the deeds of the wicked... 'And the world was chaos and

void' (Genesis 1:2) - these are the deeds of the wicked. 'And God said: Let there be light' (verse 3) - these are the deeds of the righteous. But it was still not clear which of them He desired... Then, when it says, 'And God saw the light, that it is good' (verse 4), it was clear that He desires the deeds of the righteous, and does not desire the deeds of the wicked.

From the very beginning God decided that righteousness is good and wickedness is evil. From that perspective all of our mitzvot are created.

God could have easily given us laws that resembled the prevailing, pagan way of worshiping: sacrificing humans, praying to the natural world, making war for profit. But instead God gave us our commandments: do not steal, do not murder, wage war only after trying to make peace. Our God gave us a system that He decided was righteous and holy.

Now we come to our portion. The first verse says: 'See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; A blessing, if you obey the commandments of *Adonai* your God, which I command you this day; And a curse, if you will not obey the commandments of *Adonai* your God, but turn aside from the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which you have not known.'

If we follow the commandments, in other words act in a righteous way, God will bless us.

We still have the same choice that God faced when he created the world. Should we follow the ethical and righteous path and receive God's blessing or be unethical and be cursed.

We may ask: but isn't it completely clear that righteousness is better than wickedness? Not to some people.

I read this week that Frank DiPascali, the employee who helped Bernie Madoff set up his Ponzi scheme knew all along that it was illegal. "I knew it was criminal, and I did it anyway," he told the Judge. He and Madoff went to great lengths to create a smoke screen so that investors would not know there was never any investing going on. These actions were specifically designed to benefit them and hurt others. They created their own systems of ethics. In their world the ends justified the means. And while we are shocked by the magnitude of their wickedness, how many of us use a similar system to decide what is acceptable and what is not?

Now I'm not saying that any of us believe that we can do anything to get what we want. But how often do we pursue what we think is a blessing for us just because we want it so much. And on the other hand how often do we give up the glitter to go for what is more intrinsically valuable, honor, love, civic responsibility...even if it causes us some pain.

Using our mitzvot as a template, whether we observe all or just some of them, is the only way for us as Jews to live in our world as righteous people. While none of us are as corrupt as Madoff or as saintly as *Reb Zusya*, we are probably more like the mother who saw the same actions of both her son and her son-in-law differently depending on who was benefiting from their actions.

We may be tempted to cut corners in our lives. To think that we can bless ourselves even when it means acting less than ethically. We have to remember that God gave us the template of ethical and righteous behavior in *Bereshit*. Evil means to

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have a relativistic view of what is right and wrong. Righteousness is benefiting all, not just some, of us as often as possible.

Shabbat Shalom.