



## *Blessing and curses as we look to the Promised Land*

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Rabbi Nancy Rita Myers

רָאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה

“See, this day I set before you blessing and curse.” These are the opening words of our Torah portion, Re’eh, out of Deuteronomy. This last book of the Torah is directed toward the new generation of Israelites who will ultimately enter the Promised Land of Israel. Moses is dutifully trying to instruct them to stay faithful to God, follow the commandments, and if they do, oh, the blessings they will enjoy.

Moses sets up an incredible visual to remind them of their choice. When they enter the land, they will stand in view of two mountains. Mt Gerizim lies to the south of Shechem and has numerous springs of water at its base. Facing this fertile mountain, the Israelites will listen to the blessings that can come their way. These blessings are peace, prosperity, children, animals, and lots of produce. But if they push away God, desolate Mt Ebal reminds of them of the curses that can befall them. It’s the ultimate carrot and stick to motivate our people to stay loyal to God and observe the commandments.

Our people wandered in the desert for a long time. Forty years to be precise. It can feel like, we too, have been wandering for months without end, and the time of blessing seems far away. It was only last February when we could congregate and celebrate in large groups. It seems like a life time ago when we could go to movie theaters, concerts, sporting events, and even, gulp, eat indoors. We thought we would reach the Promised Land of normal living this summer. I remember telling my daughter in March when she had to cancel her birthday party, that we would put on a big one for her this summer. Sadly, it has not happened. Not only has our summer been disappointing but we are looking at a bleak fall and winter, much like Mount Ebal was for the Israelites.

Unlike our people of old, we have not transgressed God’s commandments. The spread of disease is much more complicated and due to people living in close proximity with others and historically with animals. Jared Diamond in his book, Guns, Germs, and Steel, lists some of the deadly illness that came from animals. Measles, Tuberculosis, and Smallpox originated from cattle. The Flu came from pig and ducks. Pertussis arose from pigs and dogs. And Malaria derived from birds and possibly chicken and ducks. Given the global nature of our world, the speed of airline travel, it is no wonder that disease can spread so quickly, especially a virus as contagious as Covid 19.

But here we are. I was moved by Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19<sup>th</sup> century German rabbi, who wrote, “Gerizim and Ebal are two peaks of the Ephraim range of mountains which still show a striking contrast in their appearance. Gerizim to the south of the valley of Shechem presents a smiling green slope rising in fruit-covered terraces to its summit; Ebal on the north side, steep barren, and bleak, slightly higher than Gerizim. The two mounts lying next to each other form accordingly a most telling instructive picture of blessing and curse. They both rise on one and the same soil, both are watered by one and the same fall of rain and dew, the same air breathes over both of them, the same pollen wafts over both of them, and yet Ebal remains in barren bleakness while Gerizim is clad to its summit in embellishment of vegetation. In the same way, blessing and curse are not conditional on external circumstances but on our own inner receptivity for the one or the other, on our behavior towards that which is to bring blessing.”<sup>1</sup> (pg. 1418)

Two mountains, very close to one another and yet they are so dissimilar. It reminds me of the different ways we can approach the challenges before us. Given that we don’t have control over the timing or efficacy of a vaccine, I am drawn to what we can control. According to Holocaust survivor and psychologist, Viktor Frankl, in *Man’s Search for Meaning*, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms- to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”<sup>2</sup> If Frankl, who survived four concentration camps, can assert that one can choose one’s attitude than how much easier must it be for us.

To repeat Rabbi Hirsch, “In the same way, blessing and curse are not conditional on external circumstances but on our own inner receptivity for the one or the other.” What if blessing and curse was entirely dependent on our attitude, on our perspective? Now that doesn’t detract from the challenges and suffering of this time. We have people who have lost jobs and are worried about keeping their homes. We have people who have lost loved ones to this terrible virus. And many of us are on the brink of depression and loneliness.

Even so, we have to take steps to take care of ourselves mentally, spiritually, and psychologically. Because this will strengthen our immunity and our will to live fully. And so, I believe it’s importantly for us to count our blessings even in a time of uncertainty. To let go for tonight of the worry and fear and instead to grasp tightly the joy of life itself.

Let’s try and do this now. Do you have any family members that you love and who love you back? Let’s picture them for a moment. Grandparents who could hardly wait to spoil us? Parents who cherished us. Do or did you have cousins, aunts, uncles, siblings, children and grandchildren who made you smile and feel loved? How about dear friends? Some of you have special relationships that go back decades. Let’s look inward. How about your own gifts and pleasures? What talents do you have and how have you used them? What unique experiences

have you had? What accomplishments, success, or even insights have you experienced over the years? And what of life itself? A simple breath. Breathe in. Breathe out. We do this without even noticing it most of the time. And then there is time itself. Here we gather for prayer for just over an hour. There are so many hours and minutes in a day. I mean just to think of the thoughts, ideas, and things we have within just one day. It's astounding!

Our attitude can help shape our perspective at this time. We can choose to focus on what we can do and enjoy it thoroughly. We can choose to find opportunity at this time and put it to good, meaningful use. We, in effect, are standing before two mountains. We have been in the wilderness and we don't know when we get to enter the Promised Land. We are in transition but it doesn't have to feel like purgatory. We can choose to live fully in this moment. We can choose to live fully next month and the one right after it as well.

When we count our blessings and strive to embrace all that is good in life, we may find ourselves on the foothills of Mt Gerizim. May we dwell in a place fertile for relationships, new experiences, growth, and well-being. And may we be renewed once again.

**Notes:**

1 Plaut, Torah Commentary, pg. 1418

2 Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning, pg. 66