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Reaching Out to Your Fellow Jews

This week's Torah portion singles out the *meisit* – the inciter who entices a Jew to worship idols – with the harshest treatment of any transgressor in the Torah. The verse says: You shall not accede to him [the missionary] and not hearken to him; your eye shall not take pity on him, you shall not be compassionate nor conceal him. Rather, you shall surely kill him." (*Devarim* 13:9, 10)

These highly unusual directives comprise five distinct negative commandments, which the Rambam (*Hilchos Sanhedrin* 11:5) summarizes as follows:

The laws that pertain to an inciter, a person who entices others to serve false gods, differ from those pertaining to others liable for capital punishment.

1. We hide witnesses to observe his act.
2. He does not need a warning, as do others who are executed.

3. If he departed from the court after being acquitted, and someone said, "I know of a rationale that will lead to his conviction," he is returned and retried.
4. If he was sentenced to death and someone said, "I know of a rationale that will lead to his release," he is not retried.
5. The court does not advance arguments in defense of a *meisis*. An elderly person, a eunuch, and a person who does not have children are placed on the court that judges him, so that they will not have mercy on him. For cruelty to those who sway the people after emptiness brings mercy to the world, as the Torah says, "So that Hashem will turn back from His burning wrath; and He will give you mercy" (*Devarim* 13:18).

The same Torah whose fundamental principle is "Love your fellow as yourself" obligates us to show no mercy toward the inciter and to aggressively seek his conviction and execution.

Rav Aharon Kotler, in *Mishnas Rav Aharon*, (Vol. 1, pg. 254) derives the following insight from the unique laws regarding an inciter.

Our sages teach us that God's desire to bestow reward is 500 times greater than His desire to punish. This is derived from the verse in Exodus (34:7, see Rashi there) that says that punishment can be extended only to the fourth generation, while reward can be extended for 2000 generations.

Consequently, explains Rav Aharon, if an inciter is considered the worst transgressor of all and as a result is treated more severely than even an idolater or murderer, the opposite of an inciter who leads Jews astray – namely a person who strives to bring Jews back to Torah – must be the most righteous person of all, and will be rewarded 500 times more than the inciter is punished.

It is important to note how stringent the Torah's criteria for an inciter are. If someone would tell the leading rabbi of the generation,

"Bow down to a telephone poll because it will answer your prayers," and the rabbi would dismiss him outright, saying, "You're crazy, get out of here!" the person is considered an inciter, even though his words had no impact. The mere attempt to draw a person away from Torah categorizes someone as an inciter.

Many people who dedicate their lives to outreach mistakenly believe that their efforts on behalf of their fellow Jews are significant only if the person they are working with becomes *shomer Shabbos*. That is certainly a great achievement, but it's not what confers upon a person the lofty and cherished status of a one who dedicates his life to reaching other Jews. If a person is considered an inciter just by virtue of his attempt to draw someone away from Judaism, then a person who attempts to draw someone to Judaism must be considered a successful outreach worker by virtue of the undertaking alone.

Just taking the initiative to try and reconnect a fellow Jew to Judaism is deemed by God to be the greatest good, and worthy of the greatest reward. The actual impact we have on another Jew is secondary.

Someone who tries to lead one Jew astray is attempting to move the world further away from Hashem; he is creating a *Chillul Hashem*, a desecration of God's Name. This is in contradistinction to someone who tries to bring one Jew closer to his Father in Heaven. The latter is attempting to increase the awareness of God in the world, and just making the effort creates a *Kiddush Hashem*. If he actually succeeds, then how much greater is his achievement. This is true for reaching just one Jew; how much more does it apply to someone who is making a genuine effort to impact all of *Klal Yisrael*, to reach the entire Jewish people!

Unparalleled Merit

The *Chovos Halevavos* writes something incredible:

A person's good deeds alone do not make him suitable for the reward of the World to Come. God considers him suitable only because of two other

factors in addition to his good deeds. The first is that he teaches others about the service of God and guides them in doing good... The second is God's kindness and beneficence. (Shaar Habitachon, chapter 4

A person can serve God with all his heart and raise himself to the level of angels – he can be an angel in his spiritual understanding, an angel in his business dealings, an angel in his relationships with other people – yet the *Chovos Halevavos* states that he cannot enter *Olam Haba* unless he is involved in teaching other people about God.

Why is this so? Because if you are not actively trying to bring Jews back to Hashem and His Torah, you do not really love Hashem and His children. As the Rambam writes in *Sefer HaMitzvos* (positive commandment 3), on the mitzvah to love Hashem:

Our Sages said that this mitzvah includes calling out to all mankind to serve God, exalted be He, and to believe in Him. This is because when you love someone, you turn your attention to him and praise him and call out to others to love him. So, too, if you truly love God — through your understanding and realization of His true existence — you will certainly spread this true knowledge that you know to the deniers and the foolish.

Thus, the Sifrei says: "‘You shall love Hashem’ – that is, make Him beloved among people, as your father Avraham did, as it says, ‘The souls that he made in Charan’ (Bereishis 12:5)."

The Sifrei means to tell us that Avraham, as a result of his deep understanding of God, acquired love for God, as the verse testifies, "Avraham, who loved Me" (Yeshayahu 41:8). This powerful love spurred him to call out to all mankind to believe in God. So, too, you shall love Him to the extent that you draw

others to Him.

People naturally share the things they love. What will compel us to reach out to our fellow Jews is our genuine love, excitement and appreciation for the Almighty and the wisdom of his Torah. To the extent that we love Hashem and Torah, we will be driven to share this love.

Furthermore, kiruv and learning Torah are inextricably linked. The Talmud (*Avodah Zarah* 9a) teaches that the world is destined to exist for 6,000 years, which are divided into three eras: 2000 years of desolation, 2000 years of Torah and 2000 years of the days of Mashiach. When did the 2000-year era of Torah begin? The Talmud calculates that it was when Avraham was 52 years old, when he and his wife Sarah started the first kiruv movement and began to reach out to the masses and bring Torah values to the world.

The era of Torah did not begin with Adam, nor with Shem and Eiver, who had their own yeshiva. It began the moment Avraham realized that the reality of God must be shared with the world. That is because the goal of Torah is not only self-perfection, it is to perfect the entire world. The *meisis*, in trying to lead Jews astray from God, is destroying the world. One who tries to bring the Jewish people back to God is building the world.



What Do You See?

*Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi said,
"One should live with the times."*

At first glance, this could imply adapting to current ideologies and trends, but the Alter Rebbe often repeated this dictum with a far different intention. He'd explain that "one should live with, and experience in one's own life, the specific teachings of that week's Torah portion."

The Torah connects and enriches people worldwide. Its timeless lessons are always relevant. This week's Torah portion contains allusions to the approaching High Holidays, the Days of Awe, calling on us to initiate the process of spiritual introspection. Not surprisingly, it begins, "See: I put before you this day a blessing and a curse—a blessing if you listen to the commandments of your God...and a curse if you do not listen to the commandments of your God."

Ibn Ezra notes that although Moshe was speaking to the entire Jewish People, the Hebrew word *re'eh*, see, is used in the singular. This indicates that every person is to listen to what Moshe is saying as if he was speaking to him or her individually.

Let's relate this to attending a lecture on character development. It's typical to think, "I don't have to take the speaker's words personally, since he's not speaking directly to me." Is this a helpful attitude? Of course not. Try instead to contemplate how you can apply what you're hearing to your own life. Imagine that the speaker's words are directed exclusively to you. How would you react then? That's why the Torah addresses the entire Jewish nation in the singular form. It's speaking to each one of us as the unique individuals that we are. "See," the Torah instructs you and me personally to keep our eyes wide open—especially now, when we're called upon to closely examine the choices we've made and to assume full responsibility for their consequences.

As we enter the Hebrew month of Elul, we

must stay focused on the spiritual preparation for the upcoming High Holidays. Are we ready to confront those inner stumbling blocks that prevent us from progressing, spiritually and personally? It's time to realistically evaluate our thoughts, actions, and lifestyles.

To cultivate real change that lasts, you must be willing to clearly "see" yourself—not through the lens of the past, but as you appear right now. As the world changes, so do you. How would you like to see yourself in the year to come—same old, same old, or moving closer to who you're striving to become? Living with the times also means to utilize your present opportunity to make a life-affirming change. Now is the optimal time for serious spiritual work. The month of Elul provides one the opportunity to maximize the coming days of introspection.

Ask yourself these questions: Why does the first line of the Torah portion begin with the word "see"? Are blessings and curses visible? Sometimes they may appear to be obvious, but what seems to be a curse can turn out to be a blessing in disguise²³⁵ and vice versa.

The word "see" alludes to a heightened kind of vision that is more than just physical. It includes one's inner vision or insights. The Sages taught us that the wise person is "one who sees that which is born [from their choices and actions]." This means seeing and discerning all of the possible consequences of our actions. It's likened to seeing the entire forest, not just each individual tree. A Jew strives to activate this level of insight during the month of Elul. It's the opportune time to attain the depth of understanding necessary to perceive more. Studying the Torah provides the tools.

It's interesting to note that the first letters of the Hebrew word for *berachah*, blessing, and *klalah*, curse—*beit* and *kuf*—have the same combined numerical value (102) as the Hebrew word for *emunah*. Faith helps us see

the hidden, not-yet-revealed good in our lives. Perhaps this is why the Talmud instructs us to bless God for both the good and the bad; everything that God does ultimately will come to be seen as for the good.

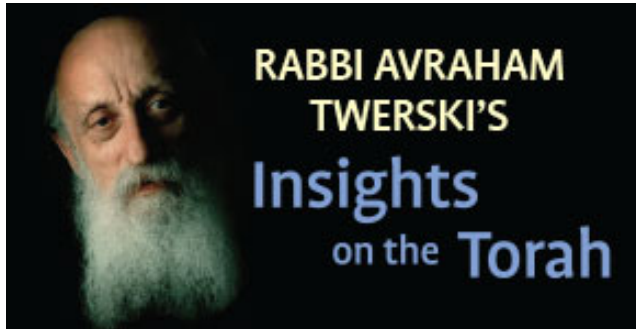
Another lesson from the opening verse can be understood if it's read slightly differently. The word *anochi*, I, is the root of the Hebrew word for *anochiyus*, ego. The verse could be read homiletically as saying, "See, the ego [I] placed within you today can be used as a blessing or a curse." This interpretation by the Baal Shem Tov implies that the ego stands between a person and God. When left unchecked, the ego can come between one's relationships with God and others. In this sense the ego can be a curse. When contained and channeled appropriately, the ego can be a tool assisting one in actualizing goals. When utilized for good, the ego becomes a blessing.

Every word of the Torah is intentional and significant. "See, I put before you this day a blessing and a curse." Moshe said these words thousands of years ago, yet you're reading them now. They are speaking to each of us today. Be ever-mindful that today's choices can ultimately bring about a blessing or a curse. How you choose to "see" yourself and your circumstances can reveal a blessing or conceal it. What you "see" today is up to you. Choose to enrich your day and yourself with the Torah's teachings. You'll be "living with the times"—the very best of times.

Making It Relevant

1. How can you choose to see your life with a "positive eye" just for today? What are practical steps you could take to achieve this goal? Repeat them daily.
2. Be mindful that God's commandments are specifically designed to produce good, even if our eyes can't perceive it now. Remember, the trees that look dead in the winter are really just

- preparing to blossom in the spring.
3. Read the weekly parashah. Find at least one lesson and incorporate it to "live with the times."



Oh Say Can You See

"See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse" (Deut. 11:26).

R Yitzchok Meir of Gur says that God has given a person the wisdom and understanding to be able to distinguish between right and wrong, between a blessing and curse.

We have not only the intelligence to make wise decisions but also the ability to do so. Yet, we often see people making unwise decisions that are to their own detriment, and they fail to use these God-given strengths in their own favor.

This thought occurs to me when I see intelligent and even scholarly people smoking cigarettes, knowingly poisoning themselves. True, it would require effort and some tolerance of discomfort to break the habit, but certainly one's life is dear enough that one should willingly accept the discomfort in the interest of survival. People who readily accept the discomfort of a surgical procedure to save their lives nonetheless appear unable to do so with regard to discontinuing smoking.

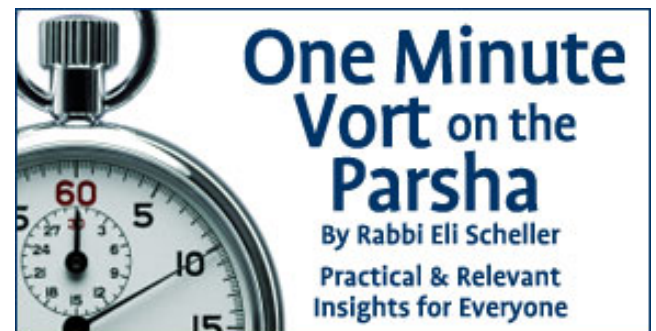
The reason for this discrepancy is that one's

judgment is distorted by what one would like to believe. The Torah states this very clearly: "A bribe will blind the eyes of the wise" (Deuteronomy 16:19). One's wisdom is ineffective when a bribe has affected one's judgment capacity. A blind person would indeed wish to avoid falling into a pit, but he cannot help himself if he cannot see it.

This is true of every unwise decision. Smoking is just one stark example. We are constantly under the influence of biases that impair our judgment.

The blind person cannot make himself sighted, but we do have the ability to overcome the blindness of our biases. We just need to be on the alert and on the defensive, realizing our vulnerability.

Moses chose his words very deliberately: "See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse." See, indeed. You have the ability to overcome the blindness of your biases.



Not the Way It Seems

See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. (Deut. 11:26)

Moses informed the people about the blessings and curses that would be recited on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal. The verse begins with the word "re'eh" - See, which is in the singular form. It then continues with "lifneichem" -

before you, which is in the plural form. What is the reason for this change?

When a person finds himself in an inconvenient situation, he may become distressed and upset that such a "curse" has happened to him. For example, if one gets stuck in traffic he may miss his flight, and as a result he may lose out on a big business deal. But the truth is that it can actually turn out to be a blessing. It is possible that the loss of money is meant as an atonement for past sins, as well as preventing worse catastrophes from occurring. The Torah is alluding to this message by putting "See" in the singular form, for there is really only "One" that knows if something is a blessing or a curse - God.

A man once asked King Solomon to teach him the language of the birds. King Solomon refused, explaining that it was not a good idea to be familiar with it. The man persisted, so King Solomon taught it to him.

One day the man was walking down the street and listened to the birds chirping. They were talking about him, saying that tonight all his sheep were going to die! He thought to himself, "This is horrible news, but at least I can sell them before that happens." Indeed he sold his sheep.

A few days later he listened to the birds chirping, and again they were talking about him, saying his house was going to burn down. He quickly sold it, thinking to himself, "It's a good thing that I know bird language! I am saving myself so much money!"

The next day he heard the birds saying that tonight *he* would die! He ran to King Solomon and told him what had happened. King Solomon replied, "Now you'll understand why I didn't want you to know the language of the birds. You did a certain sin for which you deserved a severe punishment, but God, in His great kindness, wanted to give you a clean slate by giving you a small punishment - killing

all your sheep. However, you didn't allow Him to do that, so He moved on to your house. You still did not allow Him to do so, and therefore the only thing that God could give you to provide you with atonement was your death."

When troubles befall a person he should attempt to accept it with joy, for who knows what tragedies it is saving him from.