



Blessing, Choice and Awareness: Torah Reflections on *Nitzavim-Vayeilech*

Deuteronomy 29:9 – 31:30

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As Moshe describes the blessings and the curses that God offers to the children of Israel in this week's Torah portion, we come face to face with the essence of the Shema, "*Hear O Israel, Adonoi our God, Adonoi is One*"¹. These words preclude dualism and fragmentation of any kind; there is only Oneness. Moshe tells us that blessings and life, as well as curses and death, emanate from the same unified source. God is the rain, and God is the drought; the medicine, and the disease; the hope, and the despair. God can be discerned in what one offers in sacrifice, in the intentions behind the offering, and in the fire that consumes it. In the words of Isaiah, "I am the One who creates light and creates darkness; Who makes peace and creates evil; I am God, who makes all these things".² From this vantage point of Oneness, blessing and curse are not polar opposites, but rather manifestations of a singular energy. Whenever we find ourselves in crisis and pain, or are faced with realities that seem to lack fairness or meaning, stepping into this awareness of Unity can comfort us, help us let go of expectations, and allow us to truly be present in the moment.

Our ability to perceive unity within seeming contradictions depends on the attitude we bring to the table. At each moment, the decision to engage with thought and empathy, or mindlessness and indifference, is totally ours. We have before us the richly colored spectrum of possibilities, and we are commanded to choose: "I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring".³ Freedom of choice is the gift of gifts, and it distinguishes a free person from a slave. Our eyes and ears are hard-wired to process sights and sounds, but we choose whether or not we want to see and hear with our hearts as well, and thereby access invisible and unspoken realms within others, and the world around us.

Choosing life over death speaks to our emotional and psychological existence, as well as to our physical body. When we are enslaved by addictions, self-destructive behavior, negativity, or pessimism, we do not choose life for ourselves, or for our families. Choosing life means we are willing to be proactive, both in action and in attitude. The fifteenth century Spanish Talmudist and philosopher, Isaac Arama, elaborated on this further, "We have to take the first step to rouse ourselves from the depths of lethargy and despair, and until we have done so to the best of our ability, 'in the land of our enemies', we cannot hope for any encouragement or redemptive sign from God."⁴

To truly choose requires us to be deeply aware. Achieving different levels of awareness is a life long process, not a final destination. Although fruit may appear along the way, it is to nourish and inspire our continuation of this journey. Moshe never set foot in the Promised Land. He was about process, not about crossing the finish line. Process is dynamic and living;

destination is static and end of the line. Moshe's goal was to refine the mentality and spirituality of his nation, to form and transform the Children of Israel. His journey was one of self-realization and self-definition. Through Moshe's voice,

God told us to choose life. Through Moshe's life, God showed us that choosing life means choosing the journey. Whether we seek unity and comfort in the shattered world around us, or desire more fulfillment of our personal potential, may we have the courage to embark on the journey, and the wisdom to have transformation and awareness as our goals.

¹ Deuteronomy 6:4

² Isaiah 45:7

³ Deuteronomy 30:19

⁴ Akedat Yizhak, Isaac Arama, as cited in, Studies in Devarim, Nehama Leibowitz, p.318, Ahva Press, 1986

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