

Choices, Decisions and Tradition

(Old Testament, Book of Devarim, Chapter: R'eih)

Summary: The Israelite God gives the people a choice between a blessing and a curse and reviews dietary restrictions- keeping kosher.

Allegorical references: The perfect ten-second sales pitch. The ultimate close. Recruiting; interviewing; job onboarding; responding to an executive.

Moral: May all our choices be for a blessing.

Statistics: 1,147 words (approximately 10 minutes speaking time); includes definition of terms used; includes 1 direct quote in English translation.

Special Note: *This is highly effective when two envelopes (containing the same speech) are held up before the audience- and if possible walked over and placed on separate tables or podiums.*

Easily Adaptable to any special diet (vegetarian) or any tradition.

Devarim, Parshah R'eih, chapter 11,. verse 26, page 1061

"See this day I set before you blessing and curse; blessing if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you this day; and curse if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the path that I command you this day and follow other gods of whom you have no knowledge"..

Shabbat Shalom. For those who don't know me, my name is Mark Daniels. I can be found on most shabbos sitting with my family off to the side over there.

I am not God, but here now for a few minutes I am giving you the congregation, family, friends and visitors choice over your destiny.

On this lecturn is a d'var torah, a blessing.
On the other lecturn is a different d'var torah, a curse.

Your choice.

Everyone understand?

Okay, show of hands for 'blessing'

Now show of hands for 'curse'

Okay. You chose. So here it goes....

Darn. Mixed the envelopes up. Okay, here goes anyway.

Today's Parshah contains instructions on worship, destruction, false prophets, death, destruction and diet.

There are two thoughts I would like- courtesy of your choice and my mistake in stuffing the envelopes- to share with you today from the parshah: One thought on the opening and One thought from the section we will read today.

I set before you a blessing and a curse. Do what I say and receive the blessing, turn away and get the curse.

What an opening! What a sales pitch! This is the beginning of "the close" with the contractual conditions laid out in front of you. Here are our options. Here's what's expected of you in our relationship. We both get what we want. It's a win-win. Why wouldn't you want the blessing?? Still, I recognize it's your choice and that you respect that I laid out the options for you and that You get to choose! How is this a bad thing? Why hesitate?

Think of it another way...

How many people here today have used very nearly the same parenting technique with their children about clothes, friends, studying, drinking, drugs or sports to get them to think they are making an independent decision?

How many people have been on interviews as interviewer or interviewee? Consider that the children of Israel have been through an interview process and have been selected as the candidate.

How many people have been mentors, advisors or sponsors or been the recipient of the advice of mentors, advisors or sponsors for newly hired employees? The "chosen ones"? to siblings, children, youth?

How many have said or been told something like: "It's your choice if you succeed here or just get by." "If you want to get ahead you won't hang out with that crowd." "You'll do well here if you don't hang out at the water cooler too often, taking long lunches or spending too much time with Mark. If you want to get ahead here, you want to follow Christina's example, hang around with her. Come on, I'll introduce you...."

"I set before you this day a blessing and curse"...

On the next thought-- I would like to share with you an experience I had that relates to the section of the Parshah we read today that covers the laws of Kashrut-

About 15 years ago or so I was having dinner with an executive of the company I worked for at the time in a very nice and quiet Manhattan Italian restaurant near where the company kept an apartment for him to stay.

He ordered pork chops and I ordered something I can't remember but likely was an eggplant or pasta dish. He knew I was Jewish and understood I had 'rules' that I followed. Rightly or wrongly, this fellow liked me and thought I was intelligent and interesting and so took an interest in me and what made me tick.

He started the conversation with a 'if I was stuck on a desert island' beginning that included his requirement for these particular pork chops and that he would apologize for not offering me a taste but he figured I would decline so he's not asking and not apologizing.

So the conversation, instead, went something like this:

"Mark, I don't understand. You're a relatively intelligent person. You seem smart and modern. You can tell me you have never tasted a pork chop or had a cheese burger? You don't think God will strike you down if you took a taste now, do you? No, I know you don't. So why not?"

I thought I was going to answer right away but stopped myself and thought for a few moments while we sat there chewing our food and drinking our drinks.

He had asked the question before of other Jews and had never received a satisfactory answer.

I thought of all the conversations I had heard where someone launched into an explanation that included reference to this parsha in the torah and God's commandment that we do certain things and act certain ways. I realized at that moment that the rhetoric wouldn't do here. This wasn't someone trying to bait me or my religious beliefs. This was someone who really was interested in me and in a considered response that meant something to me and would mean something to him.

I have had the conversation before with non- Jews and Jews, On dates, as a youth advisor, but it was there in those few moments of quiet reflection I gave the only response to the question asked that satisfied his curiosity:

Choice: Keeping Kosher reminds me daily through conscience action that I have choices I make and those choices have results, ramifications and repercussions that could be wrong or hurtful. When I make bad choices I have the opportunity to make new choices to make things better.

And Tradition: I keep Kosher out of respect for tradition, honoring my parents, their parents and their parents before them. Who am I in the scheme of things to disrespect a tradition thousands of years old when it hurts no one to do so.

It was this last reason- tradition and respect for my parent's traditions that made him say that in the many, many years of asking the question, this was the first time he understood and was satisfied. And there were no more questions.

So, connecting the dots a bit with the past few weeks lessons:

Torah means teach. Each word has importance (albeit changing with the times).

And to the Rabbis who have noted the two main reasons for following the teachings of the Torah are out of fear of God and out of love of God (the yin and yang of worship) I will add respect for tradition.

May your choices be for a blessing.

Shabbat Shalom.

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Definition of Terms Used:

God- God with a capital 'G' denotes Israelite God

Parsha- Section of Torah

Sedra- Story within the section of Torah

Shabbat- Jewish Sabbath

Shalom- Hebrew greeting: hello; good-bye; peace

Sefer- Book

Torah- Old Testament, Pentateuch, Five Books of Moses