

## **D'var Torah, Parshat Re'eh, August 15, 2020**

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According to Google Maps, if you drive 42.1 miles in an easterly direction from the center of Tel Aviv, you will arrive in one hour and eleven minutes at Mount Ebal, the mountain of curses, which rises 3000 feet above sea level. Mt Ebal is located north of the city of Shechem, which was Abraham's first stop in Canaan and where God promised him the land for his descendants. Mt Ebal faces Mount Gerizim, the mountain of blessings. Mount Gerizim is located on the other side of the valley, south of Shechem. The two mountains are 2.2 miles apart. However, to drive from one to the other according to google maps, you must drive 8 miles on a road circumnavigating the valley, and it will take you 20 minutes to arrive at Mount Gerizim. Why is one of these mountains the mountain of blessings and the other mountain the mountain of curses? Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, in a commentary written in 1878, describes Mt Gerizim as being wrapped in greenery and Gardens in contrast to Mt Ebal, which is barren and desolate, hence illustrating a blessing and a curse." In researching these two mountains, I learned from a d'var written by Gilad Gevaryahu, that many travel writers through the centuries described the contrast between these mountains. Benjamin of Tudela, a 12<sup>th</sup> century traveler, wrote: "On Mount Gerizim there are springs, gardens, and orchards. Mount Ebal is dry as stones and rocks, and between them in the valley lies the city of Shechem." A disciple of the Ramban from the 14<sup>th</sup> century wrote: "Mount Gerizim is all gardens, orchards and vineyards; seventy springs flow from it; it is called the blessed mountain. Mt Ebal is very dry, not a drop of water issues from it and it is known as the cursed mountain." The archaeologist Yohanan Aharoni (1919-1976) wrote "Mt Gerizim was

chosen to be Mt Blessing thanks to the abundant springs arising at its feet...” In fact, the word for pool in Hebrew is brekhah sharing the same root as brachah, meaning blessing.

The mountains of blessings and curses are introduced in this week’s parshah, Re’eh, when Moses says, “See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon 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 enjoin upon you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced. When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and possess, you shall pronounce the blessing at Mt Gerizim and the curse at Mount Ebal. ”. The two mountains are introduced a second time, 16 chapters and two parshiot later, in Parshat Ki Tavo, where the mysterious ceremony of calling out blessings and curses is revealed. In that ceremony, the tribes were divided into two equal sized groups of six tribes each and assigned to either the mountain of blessings or the mountain of curses. The tribes of Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph, and Benjamin were sent to Gerizim, while those of Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan, and Naphtali stood on Ebal. The ark, priests, and Levites were stationed in the valley with the priests surrounding the ark and the Levites surrounding the priests. According to the Talmud, the Levites first faced Mount Gerizim and began with a blessing: “Blessed be the man who does not make a graven or molten image”, and all of the people said “amen”, then the Levites faced Mt Ebal and said “Cursed be the man who makes any graven or molten image”, and all of the people said “amen”. In all, 12 moral principles were recited, alternating the positive and the negative. I wondered if they could hear each other across the valley, and apparently I was not the first person to ask this. According to the Jerusalem Post, in 1879 an acoustic experiment

was performed, showing that the two mountains on either side of the valley form a natural amphitheater, and voices are amplified across the valley.

Commentator and teacher, Dena Freundlich, writes that the chapters between Re'eh and Ki Tavo include a detailed listing of the commandments whose observance and violation lead to the blessings and curses. These verses serve as a bridge between the two descriptions of the mountains. This structure echoes that of Sinai where two descriptions of the Israelites momentous encounter with God are also bridged by a detailed listing of commandments. To me, this is the essence of Judaism; dramatic moments of revelation coupled with halachic minutia specifying how to live your life day by day.

After 40 years of wandering in the desert, the Israelites have matured and unlike Sinai, where they could not touch the mountain, they are commanded to stand on the slopes of the two mountains and acknowledge their responsibility for the commandments and the consequences/rewards for following or not following them.

When Moses says, "Re'eh", meaning See or behold, he is speaking in the singular to each one of the Jewish people. This also parallels the revelation at Sinai which was given to all of the Jewish people then and forever. In Re'eh, we are given a choice between blessings and curses, which means the gift of free will to choose how we will live our lives. In Pirkei Avot, it is written, Hebrew , "Everything is foreseen but freedom of choice is granted."

The curses are like a photographic negative of the blessings. Each curse hides the corresponding blessing in its words. The fact that the two groups of tribes seem to have been assigned in a random way suggests that the two mountains are equal in importance.

Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad who lived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, said that the curses are blessings in disguise. The sages believed that no evil descends from heaven. Yitzhak Lewis, a JTS professor, writes about the poet Haim Gouri who wrote about Israelis entry into the land in 1948. In his poetry, he invokes an image of the living dead, described as speaking cadavers. He sees the intertwining of chosenness and mundaneness, blessings that are accompanied by the possibility of a curse. The idea of curses containing blessings is appropriate for today. We are living through a pandemic which appears to us as a curse, but intertwined with the pandemic are blessings. We have more time to be introspective. The birds and animals that live around us are more easily seen. We cannot travel and that has led to a decrease in pollution. Even when we are going through a hard time that can feel like a curse, it is our choice to find the hidden blessings.