

The Pride of Humility

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Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer

Parshat Re'eh

Re'eh [thus, the name of the parshah] **Anochi noten lifneychem hayom b'rachah uk'lalah. Behold! I place before you today a blessing and a curse. Et-hab'rachah asher tich'm'u el-mitzvot Ad*nai El*heychem asher Anochi m'tzaveh et'chem hayom. The blessing if you listen to the Commandments of your Eternal G*d which I command you today. V'hak'lalah im-lo tish'm'u el-mitzvot Ad*nai El*heychem v'sartem min-haderech asher Anochi m'tzaveh et'chem hayom. And the curse if you do not listen to the Commandments of your Eternal G*d and wander away from the path which I command you today. (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)**

The traditional commentaries tell us that the blessing and the curse are described a few chapters later, in *Parshat Ki Tavo*, which we will read in three weeks. Chapter 28 of Deuteronomy contains a lengthy list of blessings and curses which seem to constitute the reward for obedience and the punishment for disobedience.

But there is another interpretation. In the Talmudic tractate *Avot*, we read, "The reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah." Traditionally, this dictum is interpreted in two ways.

On the one hand, the sages tell us that the reward for performing a mitzvah is that we are given the opportunity to perform another mitzvah. If we set ourselves on the mitzvah path, the doors will be opened for us. Each performance of a mitzvah makes performance of the next mitzvah a bit easier. Thus, the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah.

On the other hand, the Hassidic master Rebbe Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev explains that the reward of a mitzvah is a mitzvah. The reward for having performed a mitzvah is the knowledge, the awareness, of having done G*d's Will, the awareness that we have been found worthy of performing the mitzvah. Rebbe Levi Yitzhak, in an interpretation that fully justifies the description of the early Hassidic masters as "Jewish Zen masters," teaches us that the blessing, the reward, is the very awareness of our having done G*d's Will, the consciousness of our having fulfilled a Command of our Creator, of our having

been permitted to do what the *M'rahemet shel Olam*, the Enwomber of the Universe, asks us to do.

And the mitzvah, thus, is to be performed *lishmah*, for its own sake, because it is its own reward. It is not done for the sake of physical security, nor for the sake of emotional satisfaction, nor for the sake of avoiding feelings of guilt, nor even, strange as it may sound, for the sake of fulfilling G*d's Will. No; the blessing, the reward, is simply our knowledge of having performed the mitzvah.

Rebbe Levi Yitzhak cautions, however, that there is a trap here which can catch the unwary. "One should not," he declares, "let one's heart swell with the idea that one is truly serving G*d by Torah study, by mitzvot, by that unique union of love and fear which we call *yirat Hashem*, the awe of G*d. In that which one feels in one's soul during service to G*d," he continues, "one can, G*d forbid, fall spiritually from level to level until one comes to a desire for physical rewards." What Rebbe Levi Yitzhak seems to intend is the idea that even *Torah lishmah*, even *mitzvah lishmah*, even fulfilling the mitzvot entirely for their own sake, can trap us and lead us, G*d forbid, into unctuous piety and unmerited pride (as if there were any other kind, for who among us is so great as to be worthy of feeling pride?). How much more is this true of performing mitzvot for lesser reasons?

A Christian mystic, St. John of the Cross, writing in Spain more than two centuries before Rebbe Levi Yitzhak, warns us that, as we become fervent and diligent in spiritual acts and exercises of devotion (which we may express in Jewish terms as the performance of mitzvot), this spiritual prosperity – despite the fact that holy actions, by their very nature, generate a certain humility – often generates a certain secret, or, sometimes, not so secret, pride and self-satisfaction.

Thus, when G*d tells us, "**I place before you a blessing and a curse**," we may understand that the blessing – the reward of knowing that we have been found worthy of performing a mitzvah – may, G*d forbid, give rise to the curse of pride and self-righteousness.

To the humility of being found worthy of performing the mitzvot, may we speedily be led.

Shabbat Shalom.