

**Parshat Re'eh:  
On Seeing Good and Seeing God  
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The opening of this week's portion, *parshat Re'eh*, presents the children of Israel with a stark binary choice:

26 See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse.  
27 The blessing, that you will heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today; 28 and the curse, if you will not heed the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the way I command you this day, to follow other gods, which you did not know. (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)

כז כו רָאָה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה: כז  
אֶת־הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם  
אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם: כח וְהַקְלָלָה  
אִם־לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְסָרְתֶם  
מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מִצְוֶה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְלַכֵּת  
אֲחֵרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יְדַעְתֶּם: (דברים  
יא:כו-כח)

Today, God says, I am offering you something new. Take note. "*Re'eh*." Behold with your own eyes. Before you lies the possibility of blessing or curse, the path toward God or the path away from God. There will be consequences for your choices, so decide wisely which direction you will take.

Important as this message is, it is hardly new. The end of last week's *parsha* is but one example of many that exhorts the nation to choose good (i.e. actions in accordance with the Torah) in order to receive good. What then ought the people "see"? What is the blessing and what is the curse introduced here?

Rashi, characteristically, interprets this verse locally and sees in it a reference to the upcoming series of blessings and curses declared on Mt. Grizim and Mt. Eval, as listed in Deuteronomy 27:15-26. But the Chasidic interpreters, also characteristically, see in these verses not a choice for the here-and-now, but an existential and spiritual charge for all time, centered on various meanings made of the word "*anokhi*," "I" (Deut. 11:26).

For the *Maor VaShemesh*, Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Halevi Epstein (c. 1753), the "I" at stake is one's own sense of self. "רָאָה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה" means "Be aware: Your own '*anokhiut*,' or ego, can be for you a blessing or a curse." He writes:

See *anokhi*, I...a blessing and a curse. *Anokhi*, I. The importance of a person in her own eyes can be both a blessing and a curse. [The verse] indicates that *anokhi* stands between God and yourselves. When a person thinks of herself as a somebody, this can be a mask that separates between her and the Holy Blessed One, and this is a curse. But [selfhood] can also be a blessing. Sometimes the evil inclination tells a person, "How can you dare to pray before the Holy Blessed One, when you are a worm and not a person?" Then she must fortify her heart to enter the palace of the king. Then *anokhi*, selfhood or ego, is for a blessing. (*Maor VaShemesh*, "See I")

ראה אנוכי...ברכה וקללה. אנוכי. חשיבתו של אדם בעיני עצמו יכולה להיות גם ברכה וגם קללה: נאמר אנכי עומד בין ד' וביניכם, שמה שהאדם מחשיב עצמו כיש זהו מסך המבדיל בינו ובין הקב"ה וזהו לקללה, ויש גם לברכה: לפעמים אומר יצר הרע לאדם כיצד זה אתה מעיז להתפלל לפני הקב"ה ואתה תולעת ולא איש, ואז צריך הוא לאמץ את לבבו ולבוא בהיכל המלך, ואז אנכי הוא לברכה. (מאור ושמש, "ראה אנוכי")

The injunction to see ("*re'eh*") is an invitation to look in the mirror. To behold with honesty and integrity how one appraises oneself; how one's ego gets in the way of spiritual growth and how it enables it. The self is a

tool and an impediment; an enabler of open connection and a prod toward haughty isolation; a *bracha v'klalah*, a blessing *and* curse all at once. So keep it before your eyes; be vigilant about it; and keep it in check.

As the *Sefat Emet* says, noting the thrice-repetition of the word "*ha'yom*," today:

Every day is a new [opportunity for] choice. (*Sefat Emet*, Re'eh 1873) לפניכם היום. כל יום בחירה חדשה. (שפת אמת, ראה תרל"ג)

The work of monitoring the ego is a laborious one and also a liberating one. For every single day one must start over, choosing again and again to value the self enough to stand before God, but not too much, so that one might humble oneself before Him.

For some Chasidic thinkers, God also humbles Godself before us. Indeed, the *anokhi* of "ראה אנוכי" for them is actually God, master of the original *Anokhi*. In the words of one rather un-chasidic commentator, the Talmudist Rabbi Yechiel ben Asher (1250/1259-1327):

"Behold *anokhi* [I]." Behold and choose in the *Anokhi*--in the one who said [at Sinai] "I (*anokhi*) am the Lord your God" (Exodus 20:2; Deut. 5:6). (The Ro"sh) ראה אנוכי. ראה ובהר באנוכי--במי שאמר "אנוכי ה' אלוקך" [שמות כב, דברים ה:ו]. (הרא"ש)

The radical choice set forth by our *parsha*, then, is the choice for God. It is in our hands to elect belief. We must decide to see God and also to see good. That is the charge of "*re'eh*" and the promise of "*bracha*," blessing.

The *Meor Eynaim*, Rabbi Menachem Nochum Twersky of Chernobyl (1730-1797), echoes this claim:

This is the meaning of "See, I place before you this day blessing and curse." In everything you see in this world, know that I [*Anokhi*] am there in it, placing "before you blessing and curse," good and evil, mixed together in all...By seeing the good in everything and bringing it close to the ruler of the world [or, raising it to the level of the cosmic *aleph*], you bring about blessing in the world. (*Meor Eynaim*, Re'eh) ...זהו "ראה אנוכי נותן לפניכם," בכל מה שאתה רואה בדברים שבעולם תדע ששם "אנוכי נותן לפניכם ברכה וקללה," שהוא בחינת טוב ורע המעורב בכל הדברים כנזכר לעיל...על ידי שרואה הטוב שבכל דבר ומקרב לאלופו של עולם, הברכה באה על ידי זה... (מאור עיניים, ראה)

There is blessing to be found—not bestowed—through the hard work of choosing to discern good amidst the mess of the world and resolving to see God in that mix. We have the power to transform our own perceptions of the world and thus the power to transform our experience of it. For the *Meor Eynaim*, spiritual access begins with human choice.

Granting this power to human beings means stripping God, the all-powerful, of it, rendering God rather vulnerable to us. Reb Boruch of Medzhybizh (1753-1811), the grandson of the Baal Shem Tov, articulated this rather poignantly in his commentary on our verses:

"*Anokhi* [I] place before you" [or give to you] [Deut. 11:26]--It is as if I [God] give myself over to your hands, in the manner that the rabbis said (BT Shabbat 105a): *Anokhi* is an acronym for 'I wrote and gave myself [with the Torah].' Thus, the blessing and curse are in your hands. Like "A righteous person rules with fear of heaven" (II Samuel 23:3) [here interpreted to mean אנוכי [נותן לפניכם]--כביכול, את עצמי אני נותן בידכם, על דרך חז"ל (שבת קה) אנוכי--נוטריקון: אנא נפשי כתיבת יהיבית. ולכן הברכה והקללה בידכם. בחינת "צדיק מושל ביראת אלוקים." וכן הוא במדרש (תרומה פ' לג) אמר

"A righteous person rules over their fear of heaven."] And so it is in the *midrash* [Shemot Rabbah 33:1]: "God said to Israel: 'I sold you my Torah and it's as if I was sold with it,' as the verse says, 'Take Me [as a] donation'" [Ex. 25:2]. (*Buzino Di'Nehora*, Re'eh, p. 59)

הקב"ה לישראל: מכרתי לכם תורת, כביכול, נמכרתי עמה, שנאמר ויקחו לי תרומה."  
(בוצינא דנהורא, ראה, 59)

The theology here is deep and complicated, but for now let us just note its ramifications: God has placed Godself into the hands of human beings. We are the arbiters of His presence in the world, the determinants of whether divinity will be recognized at all.

ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה:

Recognize this awesome gift, says God. See that I have given my *anokhiut*, my holy selfhood, to you. Understand that I have entrusted you with a responsibility so severe that it is both a blessed opportunity and a cursed onus. And with that awareness, choose well, choose good, choose God.

May we keep our own *anokhiut*, our own egos, in view with vigilance so that we might see and enable others to see the divine *Anokhi*.



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