

WEEKLY TORAH COMMENTARY
Re'eh (Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17)
Rabbi Steven Carr Reuben, Ph.D.
Kehillat Israel Reconstructionist Congregation

This week we discover one of the most powerful Biblical lessons in personal motivation and success ever written. It is also the source for the idea known as "free will." God tells us, at the very beginning of the portion, "See I set before you blessing and curse - blessing if you obey the commandments of Adonai your God which I enjoin upon you this day, and curse if you do not obey the commandments of Adonai your God, but turn away from the path which I enjoin upon you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced." (Deuteronomy 11:26-28)

The Vilna Gaon, one of the greatest Jewish minds in the past several hundred years explains that there is a reason "I set before you" is written in the present tense and not in the past ("I have set before you") as we might have expected. It is to teach that God continually gives us choices - each and every day of our lives. In fact day by day, and hour by hour and minute by minute we are given the choice of filling our lives with blessings or curses.

I believe that the quality of our lives is directly a reflection of the quality of our choices. Every decision we make, every choice we make either brings more blessing into our lives and into the world, or diminishes the holiness of the world in which we live. It is totally up to us.

In fact, even when it appears that our lives are not in our own hands, and circumstances arise that challenge our sense of control and personal power - even then it is ultimately up to us.

In this week's Torah portion, God challenges us to choose blessings and not curses and in so doing teaches us the profound lesson that ultimately it is always our choice to make. We may accept evil in our midst, and curses in our life, or choose the good and to see life as filled with blessings regardless of what happens to us.

The challenge is written in the present for another reason I believe. Too often we feel trapped by the past. Too often I hear people say that "This is just the way I am," or "This is what I always do," or "I guess I just have to pay the consequences of all those past failures or bad decisions that I have made in my life."

One of the most important lessons we can learn is that the past is just the past. We are not trapped forever by our past choices or our past behaviors. If that were so, we wouldn't have been given Yom Kippur every year. Instead, we have the power every single day to choose differently than we have chosen before. If we have chosen addictive behaviors of various kinds, or dangerous activities (like drinking or drugs and driving), today we can make a different choice. In fact, every day we can make a different choice - and in so doing transform our lives in an instant.

That is the lesson of this week's Torah portion. The good life is dependent on our ongoing choices, and not upon what we have done in the past (or what we intend to do in the future either). Every day is another chance to change. Every day is another opportunity to say "Yes" to blessings, "Yes" to that which is holy, "Yes" to that which brings more goodness into our lives and relationships.

The Talmud teaches that "The reward for the mitzvah is the mitzvah itself." It reminds us that every time we make the right choice. Every time we choose to bring more joy, more compassion, more love, more holiness, more godliness into our lives and the world, that very choosing is its own reward. The reward comes in many forms, not the least of which is our own enhanced spiritual self-esteem as we increasingly feel good about ourselves and who we are with every positive, nurturing, self-loving choice we make.

"See, this day I set before you blessing and curse..." and our challenge is to choose the blessings and in so doing to be a blessing as well.