

Our reading opens, “**See**, this day I set before you blessing and curse” (Deut. 11:26 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 1061). The Midrash uses this verse to comment on the two readings known as *Tochecha* - Rebuke, (Lev. 26:14-45 – *Etz Hayim*, pp. 748 – 752; and Deut. 28:15-68 - *Etz Hayim*, pp. 1150 – 1157). Each is part of a very long aliyah, but it is customary that we do not break these aliyot into shorter aliyot. The Midrash asks,

“Why is it not permitted to break up the [Torah] reading of the Curses [or, Rebukes]¹? R. Joshua of Siknin said in the name of R. Levi: the Holy One, blessed be He, says: ‘I have written concerning Myself, *I will be with him in trouble* (Psalms 41:15); it would not be fair that my children should be cursed and I be blessed.’ How could this come about? Should the reading of Curses be frequently interrupted then every one called to the reading would have to recite two benedictions, one before it and one after it; therefore, one only should read them all. The Rabbis say: God said: ‘I did not give them [Israel] the Blessings [preceding the Curses in Lev. 26 and Deut. 28] and the Curses for their hurt but only to show them the good way which they should choose in order to receive reward.’ Whence this? From what we have read in the context under comment, Behold I set before you this day, etc. [blessing and curse].”²

Joel Bernstein has taught us over the last two weeks concerning the sense of hearing as an instrument of learning. The Midrash comments on our opening verse to link all the senses as instruments of learning.

This bears out what Scripture says, *Hear ye, and give ear, be not proud*, etc. (Jer. 13:15). What is the meaning of *Hear ye, and give ear*, etc.? ... ‘*Hear ye*’ the words of the Torah; ‘*and give ear*’ to the words of the Torah. What is the meaning of ‘*Be not proud*’? Do not prevent good from coming upon the world, ‘*For the Lord has spoken.*’ And where did He speak it? *If ye be willing and obedient, ye shall eat [using taste, smell] the good of the land; but if ye refuse and rebel, ye shall be devoured with the sword; for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken* (Isa. 1:19-20 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 1003).... R. Levi said: This can be compared to a servant to whom his master said: ‘Here is a golden necklace, or otherwise, here are iron chains.’ [Implication – to wear, thus, to **touch**.] So God said to Israel: ‘If you do My will, lo, here is the good and the blessing; and if not, lo, here is the curse. Lo, here are the two ways before you.’ **BEHOLD, I SET BEFORE YOU THIS DAY A BLESSING AND A CURSE.**³

The Midrash links our opening verse with a verse from last week’s reading, asking:

What is written in an earlier passage? *For if ye shall diligently keep [all this commandment, etc.]* (Deut. 11:22 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 1053 – note the Hebrew says *Mitzvah*, commandment, rather than Torah, a more usual match to the English “Instruction”; note also the use of the singular, where we might expect the plural). Which [is the precept referred to in] ‘*all this commandment*’? R. Levi said: The recitation of the Shema; the Rabbis say: It is the Sabbath, which is equal to all the precepts of the Torah.

A modern commentator, Dr. Noah Bickart of Yale and the JTSA, notes that a similar odd wording, “all the commandment” rather than “all the commandments,” appears in Deut. 8:1 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 1039 - also in last week’s reading. Citing his mentor, Professor Neil Danzig, Dr. Bickart writes:

¹ Lev. 26, or Deut. 28

² [FS], p. 89

³ [FS], p. 90

I propose that we look to Mishnah to solve the question I posed above regarding the strange singular form in our verse:

Those who perform a single commandment—it is good for them, their days are lengthened, and they inherit the Land, but those who do not perform any single commandment—it is not good for them, their days are not lengthened, and they do not inherit the Land. (M. Kiddushin 1:10)

The linguistic relationship here is self-evident. The Mishnah is speaking of a singular commandment, without telling us which one it is. The reward, however, is quite specific, and is precisely the same reward as in Deuteronomy 8: long life, possession of the Land, and general wellbeing.

... The Talmud asserts that it speaks of a person who is good and bad in precisely equal measure (BT Kiddushin 39b). If we were to adopt the primary metaphor of the High Holidays, ... such a person has just as many entries in the Book of Life as in the Book of Death. It is this person who needs either one good deed or the absence of that one good deed to tide them over into either camp. (It is interesting to note that the opposite of a mitzvah is not a sin, here, but simply the lack of a mitzvah.) Given that none of us has access to those imaginary books in the sky, the truth is that each and every one of us is always in this position.

So the Mishnah, and therefore Moses, is encouraging us to see ourselves as constantly standing at the brink, and it is our job to pick a mitzvah. While the plain sense of Deuteronomy 8 seems to insist upon perfect performance of all the mitzvot, the fact that the Torah speaks of this as a single mitzvah and not all of them is something from which we ought to take comfort.

In the Jerusalem Talmud, Yosse the son of Rabbi Boon makes this point even more beautifully, when interpreting this mishnah. He suggests that we should each pick a mitzvah, one single mitzvah to be scrupulous about and to perform as often and as well as we can (JT Kiddushin 1:9 / 61d). I know which mitzvah is Professor Danzig's favorite, for it is mine as well, and that is *Talmud Torah*, the study of Torah in all its various forms (that is what JTS is really all about, after all). But it need not be everyone's. It could well be visiting the sick, or welcoming guests into our homes, or making peace between people, or putting on tefillin, or keeping kosher, or shaking the lulav, or even providing the necessary funds for the community to function. There are 613 of them, but all we need to do is pick one. Moses is telling us here to pick a mitzvah, any mitzvah, and promises that it will be well worth it if we do.⁴

I don't think Professor Bickart is telling us that one mitzvah gets us off the hook for all the others; rather, that we should find a mitzvah that resonates and be sure to perform it particularly well.

References

[B] Noah Bickart, "Just One Mitzvah," <http://www.itsa.edu/just-one-mitzvah>

[FS] Rabbi Dr. Maurice Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *The Midrash Rabbah – Deuteronomy* (New Compact Edition – volume 3), Soncino, London, 1977

⁴ [B]