

Ki Tavo 5778

Shabbat shalom. Earlier this morning, I gave you a synopsis of today's parashah. Then, we read it from the Torah. In lieu of typical d'var Torah, today I am going to tell you a story and then take just a few moments to relate it back to our parashah. Sometimes a story gets the job done. I hope this will be one of those times. Later, you can tell me how you felt about it.

"The Curse of Blessings," by Mitchell Chefitz.

There was an Officer of the Law, a recent graduate, proud as you can imagine, in his uniform of blue with brass buttons and gold epaulets. He wore a hat with a plume and a sword with a gold and ivory handle. He was as pompous as could be. He was arrogant and bold and callous. Every letter of the alphabet served only to demonstrate his authority and exalt his being.

One day he was walking his beat and heard a commotion in an alley. He ventured into the darkness, and there in the distance saw a man in rags. "Come forward," he commanded. "Come forward now!" But the man in rags did not come forward. "I am an Officer of the Law, and I command you, come forward!"

The man in rags did not move. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and spoke, "I don't know what I'm going to do with you."

"Do with me?" the Officer of the Law mocked. "Do with me? You don't do with me! I do with you! I am an Officer of the Law, and I command you to come forward."

"Now I know what to do with you," the man in rags said, and as he spoke, he drew his sword. "Now I know what to do." Without further word, he moved to attack.

The Officer of the Law drew his own sword in defense. "Stop that!" he ordered. "Put your sword down right now!" But the man in rags did not stop. The Officer of the Law had to parry thrusts left and right. "Stop!" he said again, but to no avail. The Officer of the Law was forced to retreat.

When it seemed the man in rags would prevail, he lowered his guard, and what the Officer of the Law had intended as a parry became a thrust. His sword ran through the man in rags. "I didn't mean that," the Officer of the Law said. "I didn't meant to hurt you. Why didn't you stop when I ordered you to? Why did you attack me?"

The man in rags waved the words away. "I am leaving you," he said, "and as I do, I put upon you the Curse of Blessings."

"The Curse of Blessings. Every day you must say a new blessing, one you have never said before. One the day you do not say a new blessing, on that day you will die."

The man in rags closed his eyes. The Officer of the Law looked about for help. There was none to be found. When he turned back, the man in rags had disappeared. He was gone.

"It was a dream," the Officer of the Law thought. "Only a dream. I imagined it."

The time was late in the afternoon. The sun was setting. As much as the Officer of the Law tried to ignore his experience, he could not. The day ended with the sunset. The Officer of the Law felt his body growing cold and knew from the chill that his life was leaving him. In a panic, he uttered

these words of blessing: "You are blessed, God, who has created such a beautiful sunset." At once warmth and life flowed back into him. He realized, with both shock and relief, the curse had been for real.

The next morning he did not delay. He woke with words of blessing. "You are blessed that You allowed me to wake up this morning." His life felt secure the entire day. The next morning he blessed his ability to rise from his bed, the following day, that he could tie his shoes.

Day after day he found abilities he could bless. That he could go to the bathroom, that he had teeth to brush, that each finger of his hands still worked, that he had toes on his feet and hair on his head. He blessed his clothes, every garment. He blessed his house, the roof and floor, his furniture, every table and chair.

At last he ran out of things to bless, so he began to bless relationships. He blessed his family and friends, fellow workers, and those who worked for him. He blessed the mailman and the clerks. He was surprised to find they appreciated the blessings. His words had power. They drew family and friends closer to him. Word went out that the Officer of the Law was a source of blessing.

Years passed, decades. The Officer of the Law had to go farther afield to find new sources of blessing. He blessed city councils and university building, scientists, and their discoveries. As he traveled through the world, he became in awe of its balance and beauty and blessed that. The more he learned, the more he had to bless. His life was long, and he had the opportunity to learn in every field.

He passed the age of one hundred. Most of his friends were long gone. His time was relegated to searching for the purpose in life and the one source from which all blessings flow. He had long since realized he was

not the source but only the conduit, and even that realization was welcomed with a blessing that sustained him for yet another day.

As he approached the age of one hundred and twenty, he considered that his life was long enough. Even the great saints had not lived longer. On his birthday, he made a conscious decision to utter no new blessing and allow his life to come to an end. Still he could recite old blessings and throughout the day he reviewed them, all the blessings for his body and his possessions, for relationships that spread throughout the world, for the awesome beauty and balance of creation, and for the deep resonance, the pulse of purpose that pervaded his very being. But no new blessing passed his lips.

As the sun was setting, a chill progressed inward from his extremities. He did not resist it. In the twilight a figure appeared, the man in rags. "You!" the Officer of the Law exclaimed. "I have thought about you every day for a hundred years! I never meant to harm you. Please, forgive me."

"You don't understand," said the man in rags. "You don't know who I am, do you? I am the angel who was sent a hundred years ago to harvest your soul, but when I looked at you, so pompous and proud, there was nothing there to harvest. An empty uniform was all I saw. So I put upon you the Curse of Blessings, and now look what you've become!"

The Officer of the Law grasped in an instant all that had happened and why. Overwhelmed he said, "I feel blessed, dear God, that You have kept me alive and sustained me so I could attain this moment of insight."

"Now look what you're done!" the man in rags said in frustration. "A new blessing!"

Life flowed back into the Officer of the Law, and he and the man in the rags looked to each other, neither of them knowing quite what to do.

In our parashah, Moshe tells the Israelite nation that after they cross the Jordan and come to Mount Gerizim, they must reiterate the blessings they will receive if they build a life of Torah, and at Mount Eival, they are to reiterate the curses that will be their lot if they do not. Our sages imagine a ritual resembling a high-stakes game that the Israelites will play. The Israelites are to write the “Word of God” on 12 stones and then divide into two teams, each standing on the slopes of two opposing mountains, facing each other with the valley between them. The Levi'im will stand in the valley and call out a series of blessings and curses. The team on the slope of Mount Gerizim must say “Amen” to each blessing, and the team on the slope of Mount Eival must say, “Amen” to each curse. In so doing, they will dramatize their acceptance of the choices before them and their understanding that they cannot have it both ways. They must choose a life of blessing and pursue it through living out the way of life ordained by the Torah.

It strikes me that it is the act of choosing that refines us--not the act of having chosen at some point in the past. That is why, I think, Moshe says, “*R’ei anochi notein lifneichem hayom bracha uk’lalah*,” “See I set before you TODAY blessing and curse.” Every moment is an opportunity to respond to the wonder of being alive. Every moment is ripe with choice. I pray that as we prepare for the High Holy days, our thoughts are turning toward choosing lives of purpose, goodness, and blessing.