

Choosing to See



Free Will as a Paradigm of Teshuva

Free will, the ability to choose, is one of the most powerful tools Hashem has given us for growth and teshuva. As we enter the Yamim Noraim, the opening pesukim of Parshas Re'eh offer a profound framework for understanding both the nature of our choices and the way those choices can transform our lives.

רֵאָה אֲנֹכִי נָתַן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה. אֶת
הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם...
וְהַקְלָלָה אִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ...

See, I place before you today blessing and curse: the blessing, if you heed the commandments of Hashem your God... and the curse, if you do not heed...

Devarim 11:26–28

These pesukim are among the most familiar in Sefer Devarim, yet upon closer examination they are surprisingly enigmatic. Several fundamental questions immediately arise.

First, why is this posuk necessary at all? Moshe Rabbeinu has spent the entire Sefer Devarim and much of Parshas Eikev delivering one of the Torah's most passionate demands for faithfulness, as we

can see from the second perek of Shema. Klal Yisrael has already been reminded repeatedly that obedience to Hashem brings blessing, while disobedience brings tragedy. Every young child knows that mitzvos are good and *aveiros* are bad. What does this brief introduction add?

Second, why does the Torah begin with the command "*re'eh*"—"See"? Throughout Sefer Devarim Moshe repeatedly implores the nation to *hear*: "Shema Yisrael." Why, here, is seeing emphasized instead of hearing?

Finally, what exactly are we being asked to see? The blessing and curse themselves are not visible objects. What is the Torah directing our vision toward?

These questions reveal that these opening verses introduce something far deeper than another review of reward and punishment. They invite us to reconsider what blessing and curse truly mean. More importantly, they force us to confront how we can make better choices to have a fulfilling and meaningful Yamim Noraim.



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There Are No More Stickers

One remarkable approach is offered by Rav David of Lelov,¹ who understands these verses not merely as a discussion of consequences, but as a description of spiritual maturity and how we make decisions.

Children require incentives. Chazal teach that education often begins *shelo lishmah*, as the Gemara in *Pesachim* 109a says, "They said about Rabbi Akiva that he would distribute roasted grain and nuts to children on Erev Pesach so that they

would remain awake and ask questions." In *Hilchos Teshuva* 10:5, the Rambam writes, "We teach children... to serve Hashem out of fear and in order to receive reward, until their understanding matures..."

We reward children for good behavior so that they develop positive habits and eventually learn to value goodness for its own sake. External rewards serve an important educational purpose. Since their power of *bechira* is not formed and their ability to make choices that are best for them is limited, we need to provide external incentives to encourage them along the path that is best for them. It is interesting to note that when the Rambam formulated this most fundamental principle in *Hilchos Teshuva* (at the beginning of chapter 5), instead of referring to freedom of will as *bechira chofshis*, as it is commonly called, he uses the term "*reshus*."

דבר זה עיקר גדול הוא והוא עמוד התורה והמצוה שנאמר ראה נתתי לפניך היום את החיים, וכתוב ראה אנכי נותן לפניכם היום, כלומר שהרשות בידכם וכל שיחפץ האדם לעשות ממעשה בני האדם עושה בין טובים בין רעים, ומפני זה הענין נאמר מי יתן והיה לבבם זה להם, כלומר שאין הבורא כופה בני האדם ולא גוזר עליהן לעשות טובה או רעה אלא הכל מסור להם. *This principle is of great importance, and it is the foundation of the Torah and the commandments, as it is stated: "See, I have set before you today life," and it is written: "See, I place before you today"—meaning that the choice is in your hands. Whatever a person wishes to do among human actions, he may do, whether good or evil. For this reason it is stated: "Would that they had such a heart as this," meaning that the Creator does not compel people, nor decree that they must do good or evil; rather, everything is entrusted to them.*

Hilchos Teshuva 5:3

Moreinu Rav Herschel Schachter shlita explained² that in one of his drashas for Aseres Yemei Teshuva, Rav Soloveitchik suggested that perhaps the Rambam meant to bring out the following idea: in

modern Hebrew, we refer to the elections as "*bechiroi*." At election time, we are presented with a fixed set of candidates (or parties) and we choose from among them. Man, however, not only has "*bechira chofshis*" to choose from among the various options that are presented to him, but he even has "*reshus*," i.e., the ability to choose a path in life that was never even presented to him as an option.

Moshe Rabbeinu, however, is speaking not to children but to a nation that has witnessed the greatest revelations in history. They saw the splitting of the Yam Suf, they ate the *mann* every morning, they drank from Miriam's miraculous well. They stood at Har Sinai and heard the voice of Hashem.

After forty years of unparalleled Divine providence, Moshe tells them, in effect: "*There are no more stickers for being a good boy.*" You have reached adulthood; now you must make hard choices about choosing *berachah* or *kelalah*.

Moshe is telling them: the issue is no longer merely whether mitzvos produce reward. The issue is whether you are prepared to do what is right because it is true, because it is Hashem's will, even when the reward is distant or invisible.

This insight has profound implications as Elul approaches.

There is an idea attributed to Rav Wolbe and other *baalei mussar* that a person should not ignore the physical self and that healthy spiritual growth includes acknowledging the needs of the body and, at times, even rewarding it for spiritual accomplishment. Even spiritual rewards are important but not the focus, as Chazal write in *Pirkei Avos* 1:3, "Do not be like servants who serve their master for the sake of a reward; rather, be like servants who serve without condition of reward, and let the fear of Heaven be upon you." Those rewards remain secondary. Mature *avodas Hashem* ultimately means doing what is right because it is right.

We all know the areas of life where this challenge appears. Sometimes it is a mitzvah between man and Hashem, sometimes it is between man and his fellow man. Sometimes it means having a difficult conversation that we continue postponing, sometimes it means apologizing, sometimes it means confronting a painful weakness. Sometimes, that difficult conversation is with Hashem Himself.

For example, Gustavo Razzetti writes³ of "conversation debt," the emotional burden created when necessary conversations are continually delayed. The longer they are postponed, the heavier they become. Relationships slowly deteriorate not because of one dramatic event but because unresolved issues are allowed to fester.

The same phenomenon exists spiritually. We know there are areas where we need to return, repair, and reconnect. Yet because the first step is uncomfortable, we delay it until the distance grows larger.

Moshe's message is that maturity means choosing *berachah*, not because someone is offering a reward, but because closeness to Hashem is itself the greatest reward.

Why "See"?

The second question concerns the Torah's unusual opening word. Why does Moshe say "See" rather than "Hear"? The Chasam Sofer on Parshas Re'eh, drawing upon the Gemara in *Kiddushin* 40b, offers a profound explanation:

לעולם יראה אדם עצמו כאילו חציו חייב וחציו זכאי... עשה מצוה אחת אשריו שהכריע את עצמו ואת כל העולם כולו לכף זכות.

A person should always regard himself as though he were half liable and half meritorious ... If he performs one mitzvah, fortunate is he, for he has tipped the scales in favor of merit for himself and for the entire world.

According to the Chasam Sofer, this explains why the parashah begins with the singular "*re'eh*." Before Moshe speaks

to the nation collectively, he addresses each individual personally. See that your choices matter, that your actions are never insignificant and that every mitzvah has cosmic consequences.

This perspective fundamentally changes how we live. Many people never achieve greatness, not because they lack talent but because they underestimate the significance of their own actions. They convince themselves that someone else will solve the problem.

History repeatedly demonstrates otherwise. Every transformative institution begins with one individual who believes that one person's actions matter. That is Moshe's challenge to Klal Yisrael, *Re'eh*. See yourself as someone capable of changing the world and make the decisions that will get you there.

Learning to See Blessing

A second interpretation of "*re'eh*" emerges from the writings of Rav Menachem Ben Zion Sacks. He suggests⁴ that the Torah is teaching us not merely to choose blessing but first to recognize it. How we see the world profoundly shapes how we live within it. A person who views life exclusively through the lens of disappointment eventually loses hope.

A person who trains himself to recognize Hashem's blessings even amidst genuine hardship develops resilience, gratitude, and spiritual confidence. This does not mean denying suffering. Judaism has never demanded emotional dishonesty. On Tisha B'Av we mourn with complete sincerity. We cry over destruction that has not yet been repaired. Yet even mourning contains hope.

The Gemara in *Taanis* 30b teaches: כל המתאבל על ירושלים זוכה ורואה בשמחתה—Whoever truly mourns Jerusalem will merit **seeing** its future joy.

Rabbi Akiva could laugh when others cried⁵ because he understood that the

fulfillment of one prophecy guaranteed the fulfillment of the next. The foxes wandering through the ruins were not evidence that redemption would never come; they were evidence that history remained under Divine direction.

This perspective also echoes through our tefillos on Yom Tov: *Uvchein tzaddikim yir'u v'yismachu...* The righteous "see" and therefore rejoice. Their joy is not naïve optimism. It is the result of disciplined vision. They have learned to recognize Hashem's hand even when His purposes remain partially hidden.

Writing in 1977, Rav Menachem Ben Zion Sacks argued that one could not honestly observe the rebirth of Eretz Yisrael with its extraordinary agricultural flourishing, national revival, and miraculous survival through repeated wars without recognizing unmistakable expressions of Divine blessing. The ability to notice blessings is itself a spiritual achievement. During the Yamim Noraim season, perhaps one of the most transformative exercises is simply learning to identify the countless blessings already present in our lives.

What Is Berachah?

Having explored why Moshe commands us to "see," we can now ask a more fundamental question. What exactly is the blessing that Hashem places before us?

The answer depends on how we define one of the Torah's most familiar words. The Rishonim debate the precise meaning of the word ברוך. Among the most influential explanations is that of Rav Chaim of Volozhin in *Nefesh HaChaim*, (2:22) which connects the word *berachah* to the word *bereichah*, a reservoir or flowing pool of water.

When we "bless" Hashem, we are certainly not adding anything to Him. Rather, we are expressing our desire that His Divine goodness continue to

flow into creation without interruption. Accordingly, *berachah* is not simply material success. It is a continued connection to Hashem, the source from whom all blessing flows. If this is true, then the opposite also becomes clear.

The Gemara, *Sotah* 49a writes, "From the day the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed... every day, curses (*kelalah*) increase more than the previous day." The Ramban⁶ explains that these are the curses found in the "Tochacha," the rebuke found in Parshas Ki Savo. Rav Moshe Shapiro zt"l explained⁷ that the Ramban means to say that these curses affect every aspect of our physical day and are pervasive in our lives. It will only end when Mashiach comes and ends the current exile. Rav Shapiro writes: "[In exile] our lives are antithetical to what they should be in every aspect."

Kelalah is not merely punishment. It is distance, alienation, disconnection from the Source of life itself. The greatest blessing is closeness to Hashem. The greatest curse is living disconnected from Him.

This understanding transforms the opening verses of Parshas Re'eh. Moshe is not simply describing rewards and punishments. He is describing two fundamentally different ways of living. One life is oriented toward connection. The other toward separation. Every choice either deepens or weakens that relationship.

Endnotes

1. *Mayainah Shel Torah* p. 60.
2. https://www.torahweb.org/torah/2008/parsha/rsch_reeh.html.
3. Razzetti's approach is reviewed in Rodger Dean Duncan, "Conversational Debt: The Expensive Bill Many Teams Are Quietly Paying," *Forbes*, June 16, 2026, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rodgerdeanduncan/2026/06/16/conversational-debt-the-expensive-bill-many-teams-are-quietly-paying/>.
4. Menachem Tzion p.370.
5. Makkos 24b.
6. Devarim 16.
7. Re'eh, emunah, 12th Principle.