Choose Your Blessings Carefully: Thoughts for Parashat Naso, May 18, 2013

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When we pray for blessings on ourselves and our families, do we really know if we are asking for the right things?

Sometimes, we may think we very much need a certain blessing—but ultimately, what we think we want actually turns out to be detrimental to us. A short-term "blessing" may indeed be the recipe for a long-term "curse."

Or, what we may think is very bad for us actually turns out to be a blessing. At first, we think we've suffered a terrible setback or defeat; but in the long run, this "defeat" turns out to be a great blessing for us. It offers us an opportunity and impetus to move in new directions, to discover new strengths.

In this week's Parasha, we read of the blessing the priests are to give to the Israelites. After providing the text of this blessing, the Torah adds: "And they [the Cohanim] shall place My Name on the children of Israel, and I [God] will bless them." Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Torah commentator, raises the question: since the Cohanim are the ones giving the blessing, why does the Torah specify that in fact it is God—not the Cohanim—Who is doing the blessing?

Rabbi Reggio notes: "God commanded that the blessing be attributed to Him since a person does not know what is good for him/her in life. Sometimes the person desires and longs for a certain "good," and is happy when it is attained; but the [ultimate] result is very bad. And so too in reverse [i.e. something that seems bad may ultimately be very good for the person]. Therefore He commanded to have the blessings in His domain, and He will bless Israel according to His wisdom, knowing what is really good or only apparently good."

In the Grace After Meals, we say: "May the All-Merciful One fulfill the desires of our heart for the good." Rabbi Haim David Halevy explained that we add the words "for the good" since the desires of our heart may really have negative consequences for us that we cannot foresee. So we pray that the Almighty will

fulfill our prayers “for the good,” bestowing on us those blessings that are actually good for us.

Life is full of people who chase after false “blessings,” who seek short-term gain without foreseeing the negative consequences. They seek material gain, even when this entails illegal or immoral behavior. They seek “victories” that will validate their egotism and give them a sense of control over others. They seek positions of honor or influence. They are so focused on the immediate “win,” they don’t realize that the "blessings" they pursue are actually leading to a great long-term loss. They rarely consider the negative consequences e.g. the dehumanizing impact on their own lives and the lives of others. They want their “blessings” now, regardless of whether the long-term result will be harmful or even catastrophic to them and to others.

Life is also blessed with people who have faced serious reverses, but who have rallied back with great courage. The “setbacks” have actually been significant turning points that enabled them to draw on talents they didn’t even know they had. What seemed at first to be unfortunate-- was really the impetus for the person to achieve greater blessing and greater happiness.

In my book, “Losing the Rat Race, Winning at Life,” (Jerusalem, 2005), I suggested ways to re-focus our lives so as to seek the real blessings of inner wisdom, compassion, moral courage; and to avoid the false “blessings” offered by success in the rat race. I concluded the book with the following words:

“The tendencies toward conformity and adoration of charismatic idols are very powerful. Most people do not want to lose the rat race or abandon its rules—even though it destroys their happiness, undermines their morality, and deprives them of the dignity of living free and responsible lives.

Yet here we are, human beings striving to live meaningful lives. Abraham Lincoln well expressed the human enterprise: ‘I am not bound to win, but I am bound to be true. I am not bound to succeed, but I am bound to live up to the light I have.’

I would modify Lincoln’s observation: ‘If I have been true, I have won at life. If I have lived up to the light I have, I have succeeded.’”

Angel for Shabbat