

Gerizim and Ebal: Blessing and Curse
Torah Reflections on *Parshat Re'eh* (Deuteronomy 11:26 - 16:17)
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This week's Torah portion, Re'eh, begins with Moses' thundering admonition to the community of Israel: "See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of Adonai your God which I enjoy upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of Adonai your God..." (Deut. 11:26-28). Moses continues by instructing the people that when they enter the land, they are to pronounce the blessing at Mount Gerizim, a lush, fertile mound of greenery, and the curse at neighboring Mount Ebal, a barren, desolate, rocky mass. There can be no greater physical manifestation of the difference between a blessing and a curse than these towering apparitions.

Yet how often does it happen that we recognize righteous, decent, law-abiding people confined to Mount Ebal, while being aware of others who bow down to the gods of self-indulgence, indecency and lawlessness, basking on the slopes of Mount Gerizim? For those of us who are ill or who care for someone who is ill, it often feels as though we are breathing in the arid, choking air of Ebal. Often, there is anger and resentment towards a God who imposes such a life. Sometimes, a small voice in the back of one's mind asks, what did I/they do to deserve this? Countless times, I have been asked, why did God do this? Why do bad things happen to good people? In other words, why does someone who belongs on Mount Gerizim sometimes find themselves on Mount Ebal?

In 1981, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote a national bestseller. Entitled *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, I am always amazed by how many people refer to the title as **Why Bad Things Happen to Good People**. In the introduction, Kushner explains that he wrote the book, "for all those people who wanted to go on believing, but whose anger at God made it hard for them to hold on to their faith and be comforted by religion. And I ...[wrote] it for all those people whose love for God and devotion to Him led them to blame themselves for their suffering and persuade themselves that they deserved it." In other words, Kushner wrote the book for those who, consciously or not, accepted the opening words of this week's Torah portion, seemingly, at face value.

Kushner posits the notion that it is not God who causes bad things to happen to good people. We live in a world of randomness, in which bad things do happen to good people. Rather it is in how we respond to this randomness that God's presence can become manifest. What do we do with our pain, loneliness and anger? How do we make the trek from curse to blessing, from Mount Ebal to Mount Gerizim?

The great nineteenth century rabbi, Samson Raphael Hirsch, offers a similar thought in his interpretation of this week's Torah passage. He notes, "The two mounts lying next to each other form accordingly a most telling instructive picture of blessing and curse. They both rise on one and the same soil, both are watered by one and the same fall of rain and dew, the same air breathes over both of them, the same pollen wafts over both of them, and yet Ebal remains in barren bleakness while Gerizim is clad to its summit in embellishment of vegetation. In the same way, blessing and curse are not conditional on external circumstances but on our own inner receptivity for the one or the other, on our behavior towards that which is to bring blessing."

There are times in almost every life in which one feels confined to the parched earth of Ebal. At these times, Gerizim feels far away, and we feel incapable of bridging the chasm. The question we should ask though is not why are we here, but rather how do we find our way to Gerizim. Holding fast to the inspiration, strength and courage that is God-given, and sustained by community, we can make the trek, one step at a time.

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