“The Golden Mean of Extremes”

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When a parent or teacher desperately wants the child or student to take the point seriously, he or she might resort to the old phrase, “Now see here.”

That, I think, is what Moses is doing in this near final encounter with his stubborn, privileged, over-confident charges as he prepares to send them off across the Jordan without him. “Now see here,” he might have said. “Your choice is clear, if only you would acknowledge it. Honest to God, for your own sakes, take this seriously and make the right choice.”

What is the choice? Not any one specific thing, even though Moses would have the Israelites adopt a great many specific behaviors and abstentions as part of the Torah’s mitzvah system. What Moses wants is something bigger, something overarching. Moses wants his students to adopt a *weltanschauung*, a world view, a way of looking at everything, and moreover, a way of directing themselves toward a general notion of goodness, or what many of us today would call “Godliness.”

To wit, he says: “*re’eh.* Look here. *Anochi noten lifneychem hayom.* I am placing before you this very day. *b’rachah uk’lalah.* Blessing and curse.”

The blessing, if you willingly follow the mitzvot and direct yourselves accordingly. The curse, if you swerve off the path, and especially if you follow other gods whom you do not know.

What are other gods? Literally, the deities who either exist or don’t, from the Torah’s point of view, but whom many neighboring cultures seem to believe in to the point that their world views are far from the one Moses wants for his flock. In other words, not simply “don’t follow other gods,” but “don’t mimic the life paths of people who follow life paths that lead away from the good, the decent, the *mentschlich*. Stick with Torah.”

This may sound a bit strict or narrow-minded for moderns, especially when we know that the great Rambam (12th century) preached about the *sh’vil zahav*, the Golden Mean he adapted for Judaism from Aristotelian thought (and some would suggest, from Buddhist teaching as well). The Golden Mean promotes eating, but not too much. Sex, but not too much. Pleasure, but not too much. Sleeping, working, recreation, socializing, study, contemplation, family, etc. etc., but not too much. Shabbat, but only once a week. Yom Kippur, but only once a year. You get the picture.

But Rambam, I think, was talking about a Golden Mean not *between* the paths of Torah and its opposite; not *between* “blessing” and “curse.” Not some version of “be a little bit good, and only a little bit bad.” Not even close to that!

The *sh’vil zahav* is a measured way of walking the path of blessing, mitzvot, Torah, life affirmation. It is not a compromise for people who “hey, are only human.” The path of *b’rachah* is made for humans, not angels. It is a discipline, a practice. It is not a form of self-torture or abstinence.s *lo bashamayim hi*. It is not in Heaven, and therefore beyond your reach as a mortal creature.

Here with a clarification is the great Rav Ovadiah Sforno, the 15th-16th century Italian philosopher and Torah commentator. He says: “Look – take a good look – and see that your interests do not lie in the intermediate zone between blessing and curse, as is the custom of many of the nations of the world. Rather, ‘I place before you today blessing and curse,’ and they are two polar opposites. The way of blessing offers more than a sufficient sense of fulfillment, for it is the better way, while the way of curse is the way of insufficiency. And both paths lie before you, so that you may take of hold of whichever one you choose.”

Therein lies the most blessed part of the path of blessing, namely, that it is a choice. It is a *derekh*, a *sh’vil*, a *halikhah*, a path or a way. A practice. A journey, if you will. Moderation lies not in mixing this path with its opposite, but in following only this path, but in a steady, focused, measured, committed way.

One imagines Moses saying: *re’eh*. Take a good look at yourselves each and every day of your lives along the path of blessing. Measure yourselves; your intensity; your commitment; your inner growth. Find the time to encourage your fellow traveler on the left and the right as they struggle along their own version of the path. Help one another. Love them as yourself. Be there for them as you are for yourself. Accept their loving help. Let the godly image in yourself and your fellow walkers sustain you on the journey like spring water from a desert oasis. And each and every day, help one another to draw from the life-giving waters of the golden path of blessing, the *sh’vil zahav shel b’rachah*.