

## Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Re'eh

I love Chinese fortune cookies. I do not know who writes these things, but some I have received have been absolutely ridiculous – others hysterical – and still others ... who knows? Certainly some are normal about health, fortune, wisdom, and love. But, then there are the other ones. “Confucius says: “Eat fat free food,” or, “One more egg roll for the road.” Others have been blank or contained gibberish. They are fun to read, but lack any real “fortune” value. And, not once have I won anything in the lottery playing the numbers on the back of the fortune. All of this following a meal that took lots of wonderful vegetables and soaked them in sauces loaded with carbohydrates and M.S.G. that would make most dieticians cringe. It tastes good going down but we pay a price later on for having eaten it. So, why is it, then, that our tradition keeps affirming that Chinese food is our food of celebration?

For whatever reason, Jews eating Chinese food is as simpatico as joined at the hip as Siamese twins, and as mutually dependant as were Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers on the dance floor. Either one cannot fully “be” without the blessings of the other. For Jews, Chinese food is the symbol of blessing. Yes, we eat lots of other cholesterol filled foods, (Kugel, matzoh, and blintzes, etc), but you cannot find a Jewish neighborhood without the blessing of a Chinese restaurant. The fortune cookies may be lacking meaning, the food may even be dangerous, but when Jews celebrate fun things, we eat Chinese food. It is our blessing, and it is our curse. Likewise, this week’s Torah portion speaks of blessings and the curses, reminding us that they too are simpatico. They are discussed in the same verses, and at the same times. Moses splits the tribes and aligns them atop opposing hillsides overlooking the very same valley. As the text literally reads, one cannot experience the blessing without also experiencing the curse.

At some level I buy this, but to make it a dogmatic truth would seem untenable. Yes, it is hard to really appreciate having without knowing what it is like not to have. One cannot appreciate the real pain of heartbreak without having known the great gift of love. I do not think, however, that the text is trying to equate one with the other. Had the tribes lined up opposing each other in the valley, face to face, the statement might be more concrete. By placing them at the tops of the surrounding mountains, we see that the atmosphere is always charged with the opportunities for blessings and curses. As we walk through the valley, the shadows of the blessing and the curse – be they comforting or disquieting – hang over us. The text instructs us that blessings and curses do not happen – we choose to see the journey of our lives as one or the other, and that choice is ever present. The text further teaches us that our choice is rooted in the acceptance of mitzvot. If we accept them, we have chosen blessings. If we reject them, then we have chosen the curse. This is seemingly a straightforward explanation until we start to try and figure out how to define the meaning/scope of mitzvot.

Depending on how one reads the text, a mitzvah is anything from a command, to a precept, to a really strong suggestion. The interpretation depends, in large part, on the way the mitzvah is explained. There are instances where there are conflicting instructions on how one obeys a mitzvah, and where one adds in the 2000 plus years of the Rabbinic tradition, there are additional mitzvot that are not in the Torah at all. A mitzvah, then, is not a performed ritual or specific choice, rather it is the act of making an informed and ethical choice. Observing mitzvot means that we are committed to paying attention to how we live, behave, work, eat, sleep, and believe, in order to make sure that whatever we do, is not only for our benefit but for the benefit of our family, our community, and our world. Observance of ritual does not determine

the measure of a person, the integrity and thought behind one's choices provides that definition. Our obligation is to do what is ethical; what is right.

Moses commanded Israel to pay attention to the choices they make for they affect not only themselves but everyone else, for everyone is affected by the choices we make. In this sense, Godliness is all about doing that which helps the world make more sense for more of us. Where we fail to so chose, we detract from the world, hence, in biblical language, cursing it. You have before you every day, the blessing and the curse. Every day, you must choose between being and creating blessings or not - blessing it or cursing it. Join me in celebrating the many blessings we enjoy and creating even greater ones for those who come next, and it is okay to try the eggplant with garlic ... sauce free. Shabbat Shalom.