

**PARSHAT KI TAVO**  
**SEPTEMBER 17, 2011**  
**RABBI VERNON KURTZ**

I recently read the following story concerning identical twins: One was a hope-filled optimist: “Everything is coming up roses,” he would say. The other was a sad and hopeless pessimist.

The worried parents of the boys brought them to the local psychologist who suggested a plan to balance the twins’ personality. “On their next birthday, put them in separate rooms to open their gifts. Give the pessimist the best toys you can afford, and give the optimist a bale of hay.” The parents followed the instructions and carefully observed the results.

When they peaked in on the pessimist, they heard him complaining: “I don’t like the color of this computer. I’ll bet this calculator will break. I don’t like this game. I know someone who has a bigger toy car than this.”

Across the corridor, the parents looked in the other room and saw the little optimist gleefully playing with the manure. He was giggling. “You can’t fool me. Where there’s this much hay, there has got to be a pony.”

So often in life we cannot find the fine line between optimism and pessimism, between blessing and curse. It was Oscar Wilde who once wrote that there are two tragedies in life: One is not getting what one wants and the other is getting it. Too often we spend our time bemoaning what we don’t have, what is not ours rather than seeing the blessings that have come our way. The question is: do we see the glass half full or half empty?

Our Torah portion this Shabbat is filled with blessings and curses. The Torah describes for us the scene which is to take place when the Children of Israel cross the Jordan River and take up stakes in the land of Canaan. The people are divided into two groups; six tribes will stand on Mount Gerizim and six on Mount Ebal. The first group will proclaim the blessings that will come from faithfulness and following G-d’s word. The second, the curses that will follow disobedience. Immediately thereafter, the Levites will proclaim them in a loud voice and the people will answer “Amen” to each of them.

While it looks like there may be stark differences between the blessings and curses there are some nuances that show that the contrasts may not be as differentiated as they initially seem. In the statement of the blessings the Torah tells us: “Blessed shall you be in your comings and blessed shall you be in your goings.” One of the commentators suggests that this may refer to material well-being, to successful business dealings and to the accumulation of wealth. However, another commentator, the Ha-Amek Davar states: “Prosperity brings its own dangers; this blessing asks that G-d guard us from the temptations that wealth occasions.”

We have in our society more wealth than we could ever imagine. And, I am not just talking about what we have in the bank or our 401K's. At our command is instant communication, scientific and medical endeavors beyond anything our grandparents could have imagined, the ability to travel around the globe in but a few hours and the conveniences of transportation, cooking, cleaning and entertainment that would have been seen as impossible but a few decades ago. Just think how far we have progressed technologically in but the last decade. Yet, how satisfied are we? If our computer takes too long to boot up, we begin to complain. If our cell phone loses reception, we become dissatisfied. If all the conveniences don't make our life easier, we wonder if they are really worth it. We are always in search of upgrades. We are never satisfied with those things that we have and often don't appreciate the blessings that are at our command.

We may be familiar with the statement in Pirkei Avot in which Ben Zoma states: "Who is rich? One who is happy with what he has," but sometimes we don't really understand the impact of that statement. In Jewish pietistic literature, Mussar, there is a concept of Histapkut, contentedness. A Hasid once asked Rabbi Abraham Yaakov of Sadagora about social ethics: "Since our sages say there is no thing that does not have a place, then each person must have his own place. Then why do people sometimes feel so crowded?" The Master replied: "Because each wants to occupy the place of the other." The grass is always greener somewhere else. When we accumulate toys, wealth, almost anything of material value we always want more. We need to internalize the lesson from the 11<sup>th</sup> Century Spanish poet-philosopher Solomon Ibn Gabirol who wrote: "He who seeks more than he needs, hinders himself from enjoying what he has. Seek what you need and give up what you need not. For in giving up what you don't need, you learn what you really do need."

I have just completed reading a book entitled "*Tangled Webs: How False Statements Undermine America: From Martha Stewart to Bernie Madoff.*" The author, James B. Stewart, analyzes the stories of Martha Stewart, Scooter Libby, Barry Bonds and Bernie Madoff. He follows their rise to stardom, wealth and notoriety and their precipitous decline into accusations, court cases and in some cases, incarceration and significant fines. His major concern is the concept of perjury, and he asks the following question: "Why did these accomplished, celebrated, successful, wealthy leaders and role models risk so much by lying under oath?" Each of these individuals was successful in their endeavors and in their line of work. What was it, according to Stewart, that made them live beyond their means, lie under oath and destroy their reputations? He suggests that the answer was first of all that they felt they could get away with it. Then he throws the challenge back to our society as he states: "We lionize those who win, and turn a blind eye to cheating. We demand perfection and withhold forgiveness. We promote self-interest at the expense of others." I would also suggest that each of these individuals was not satisfied with what they had and in either embellishing the truth, abdicating responsibility for telling it or totally concealing it, they hoped to grow in stature, become more wealthy, aggrandize themselves and embellish their reputations.

We are two weeks away from Rosh Hashana. We will ask for many blessings from G-d for ourselves, our families, our community and our world. When we offer

these petitions to G-d can we first appreciate what we have been given? Too many of us hearken back to the picture of the glass being half empty. One of the twins was a pessimist and was never satisfied with what he possessed. The other was pleased with what he had.

Last Sunday, people stopped throughout the word to remember 9/11 and all those who were murdered on that day. Each of us, old enough to remember that date, will recall exactly where we stood and what we was doing when we heard the terrible news. Like many of you, I have my own story as well. There have been many reflections on 9/11. One of the most interesting is one that I recently read.

Rabbi Ron Yitzchok Eisenman of Passiac Park, New Jersey wrote a reflection on 9/11 which was very moving. He wrote that a few months after 9/11 a woman who was visiting his Congregation overheard the Rabbi and his friends discussing the terror attack. She decided to tell them the following story: "I have just returned from a shiva home of a family that lost a father in the 9/11 attack. The man left a family of young children and one of the girls, not more than 12 or 13, was sitting silently with her sisters and mother as everyone else was gathered around them crying. Suddenly, the girl looked up and said, 'Imma, I am happy for one thing. Remember the night before Abba went to work for the last time? You came home from a Bar Mitzvah and Abba said he was very thirsty. He asked whether anyone could bring him a cold glass of water with ice in it. I was the one who jumped up and brought him the water and he said to me, 'thank you so much Malkie; that is exactly what I needed right now. Imma, that was the last time I was able to do the mitzvah of Kibbud Av, respect for my father. I remember so clearly Abba's face as he drank the water and how happy I felt that I was able to make him happy. That is the last memory I will ever have of Abba.'" For the young girl the glass was at least half full.

Rabbi Eisenman in his reflection then writes: "I will never forget that story and think about it often, especially when I have to decide if I should spend more time with my children, my wife or someone else whose company I cherish." It is unfortunate, we must all admit, that we only appreciate what we have when we hear these types of stories or lose the blessings that were present for us.

The challenge before us is to look at the world even if the glass is only half full and to see blessing, to appreciate what we have, to show gratitude for what is ours. May the blessing that is pronounced to the Israelites in ancient times come true in our day: "The Lord will open to you His bounteous store, the heavens, to provide rain for your land and season and to bless all your undertakings."

May the work of our hands be blessed and may we be truly satisfied with the gifts that come our way.