

Death by Mediocrity (Reeh)

“Moderation? It is mediocrity, fear, and confusion in disguise... Moderation is lukewarm tea, the devil’s own brew.” – Dan Millman

We often think of moderation as a virtue. It feels safe, measured, and sensible. Yet there is a danger hidden within it. To live in the middle, without conviction or passion, is to settle for less than the life God intended for us.

The very first line of this week’s reading (Deuteronomy 11:26) boldly states:

“Behold! I place before you today a blessing and a curse.”

The Bible then continues here and elsewhere as to the various and bountiful blessings that occur as a result of following God’s commandments as well as the horrible curses that befall those that ignore God’s commands.

Rabbi Ovadia Sforno comments that the Bible, by exclaiming “Behold!” is purposely bringing our attention to a new realization. Namely, that the conduct of the Jewish people is not like that of the other nations. The rest of the world may be content with the middle road, with “sufficient”, “average” or even “mediocre” results. Sforno contends that Jews on the other hand tend to go to extremes – for better or worse.

He claims that when a Jew pursues success, he pursues it beyond the sufficient and strives for the utmost in excellence. Conversely, when a Jew is drawn to sin, rebellion or ungodly pursuits, he will aim for the deepest levels possible.

One doesn’t have to look far for some evidence to this thesis. Jews have a highly disproportional number of extremely successful scientists, philosophers, authors, sages and Noble Prize winners, as well as equally notorious gangsters, scam artists, criminals and revolutionaries. Individual members of the Jewish tribe manage to go to either positive or negative extremes of society. This extremism, this escape from mediocrity, has placed many of them in the limelight of history.

The Torah teaches that the Jewish people are not meant for mediocrity. Other nations may find contentment in the middle path. For Jews, however, the choice is sharper. We are drawn either toward blessing when we live in alignment with God’s will, or toward curse when we turn away.

Sforno’s insight is not meant to condemn, but to call us higher. To be Jewish is to live with awareness that our choices matter deeply. We are asked to bring our energy, creativity, and conviction into the service of something greater than ourselves. The Torah urges us not to accept a lukewarm existence, but to live with a positive purpose, meaning and excellence.

May we live up to those expectations.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the announcement this week, of the world's first spinal cord transplant, to be conducted in Israel. <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-864808>