

**Potomac Torah Study Center**

Vol. 7 #42, August 14, 2020; Reeh; Mevarchim HaHodesh Elul 5780

**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning almost 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his recent untimely death.**

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**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) from [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah.**

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"Re'eh" means "see." Moshe observes that the people could see for themselves that following God's mitzvot leads to blessings while not obeying them leads to curses. The focus on seeing should also remind us of Vayeira ("God appeared"), which opens with Hashem appearing to Avraham as he sat in his tent three days after his bris at age 99 (Bereishis 18). The focus on seeing in the titles and beginnings of the two parshot should suggest a connection.

I have written several times about a common theme from Rabbi David Fohrman – that many of the mitzvot (specific laws) in the Torah turn historic incidents involving earlier generations of Jews into laws. Chapter 12 in Re'eh provides a vivid example. Rabbi Fohrman and his colleague Beth Lesch demonstrate that this chapter follows closely in subject, key words, and message from the Akeidah (Bereishis 22). On the third day of Avraham's journey with Yitzhak, Avraham looked up and saw "HaMakom" ("the place," but also a name for God) in the distance. Avraham called the place "Behar H'Yereh," or God will reveal (the place). This place becomes Har Moriah, the site of the Akeidah and the place where the Temple would be built hundreds of years later.

The concept of "makom," or place, as a name for God is a bit strange. God exists in a different sphere or world than humans – that is why a human can neither see nor feel God. Humans could not survive in God's world. "God's place" is a strange concept, because God does not exist or fit in any human place or space. The difference between God's and humans' worlds helps explain why humans could never return to Gan Eden or Har Sinai, and why God Himself could not fit in the Mishkan or Temple (in the same way that a human could fit in a certain space). God could send a voice, a fire, or a cloud that humans could see – but not one of these aspects is the same as God Himself – they are only signs that God sends to fit specific human needs.

In Re'eh, ch. 12, Moshe tells the people that they could only perform the korbanot at the specific Makom (place) that God will reveal – using the same name that Avraham gave to the site of the Akeidah. However, God also gives the people permission to shecht meat and eat it at other places, if they desire meat and are too far to return to the central worship Makom for their meals. The restriction is that we must not eat blood, because blood is the soul of an animal, and we are not to eat an animal's soul. The permission to eat meat at distant locations also derives from God's blessings to Avraham. God promised Avraham many children and extensive land. Fulfilling this promise meant that many Jews would end up too far from the central place of worship to have all their meals there.

Rabbi Fohrman derives important insights about parenting from the Akeidah parallel. God told Avraham to bring Yitzhak and sacrifice him at the place that He would reveal. When Avraham followed His order and was ready to sacrifice, God had an angel intervene. Rabbi Fohrman explains that God has the power to force Avraham to sacrifice his child – but sacrificing a child is disgusting to God and therefore forbidden. Similarly, we as parents have the power to force our children to do what we want – but like God, we restrain our use of power and let our children make many decisions. An important lesson of parenting is that true power is knowing when to restrain ourselves and set aside the power. In this way, we act like God did with Avraham. Using power responsibly teaches our children and lets them grow and thrive.

We can take Rabbi Fohrman's insight a step further. Avraham first appears immediately after the story of the Tower of Babel. This story comes after the flood, when God told Noah, his family, and early people to spread out and fill up the land (Bereshis 9:1). The generations after the flood did not obey this command. Rather, they settled in Shinar and desired to build a tower to the sky to make a name for themselves (rather than devoting themselves to God). The first person to obey God's order, to move around and settle new lands, was Avraham. In this sense, Avraham was a tikkun for the evils of the generations after the flood, and specifically for the sins of the people of Shinar, as well as the model for many mitzvot in Re'eh. The incidents in the Torah that generate the laws in Re'eh therefore go back as far as Noah's children, the first generation with permission to eat meat as well as the first generation told to move around and settle new lands.

Elul starts in a few days, so we start hearing the Shofar and reciting psalm 27 twice a day – reminders to do teshuvah as we prepare for the High Holy Days. The holy days will be subdued this year, because of the danger of infection limiting shul services and meals with family and friends. The holy days always bring back memories of many years with my beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l. We shared holiday meals, had many discussions during breaks in the services, and had numerous meals together. His insights and ability to connect many subjects into a coherent whole amazed me while teaching me. It has been difficult enough for the past months davening alone at home for Shabbat and Yom Tov. With all the chagim coming up, the isolation will be even more difficult. Fortunately, prospects seem favorable for one or more FDA approved vaccinations for coronavirus before long. May the coming year bring a return to a more normal life.

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**Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Eli ben Hanina, Yoram HaKohen ben Shoshana, Gedalya ben Sarah, Mordechai ben Chaya, Baruch Yitzhak ben Perl, David Leib HaKohen ben Sheina Reizel, Zev ben Sara Chaya, Uzi Yehuda ben Mirda Behla, HaRav Dovid Meir ben Chaya Tzippa; Eliav Yerachmiel ben Sara Dina, Amoz ben Tziviah, Reuven ben Masha, Moshe David ben Hannah, Meir ben Sara, Yitzhok Tzvi ben Yehudit Miriam, Yaakov Naphtali ben Michal Leah, Rivka Chaya bat Leah, Zissel Bat Mazal, Chana Bracha bas Rochel Leah, Leah Fruma bat Musa Devorah, Hinda Behla bat Chaya Leah, Nechama bas Tikva Rachel, Miriam Chava bat Yachid, and Ruth bat Sarah, all of whom greatly need our prayers. Note: Beth Sholom has additional names, including coronavirus victims, on a Tehillim list.**

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Hannah & Alan

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### **Drasha: Parshas Reeh: Total Control** by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky © 1998

[Please remember Mordechai ben Chaya for a Mishebarach!]

In this week's portion, the Torah tells us to decimate any remnant of idolatry: "You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations that you are driving away worshiped their gods – on the high mountains and on the hills, and under every leafy tree. You shall break apart their altars, you shall smash their pillars, and their sacred trees shall you burn in the fire. Their carved images shall you cut down, and you shall obliterate their names from that place." (Deuteronomy 12:2-3)

But then, the Torah adds a verse that seems to be so unnecessary, if not wounding. The Torah tells us "You shall not do the same to Hashem, your G-d" (ibid. v.4)

The Talmud explains that from this verse we derive a prohibition against destroying synagogue property and erasing the name of Hashem. Rashi, however, quotes the Sifri, which offers an amazing interpretation: R Ishmael asks, "Can even a thought enter in your mind that the Jewish nation would break the altars of Hashem?"

*Thus Rabbi Yishmael gives an homiletic interpretation of the verse. He says that the verse is not necessarily an admonition against physically breaking the walls of the Sanctuary, but rather it is a warning to the nation not to sin, thereby causing the Sanctuary of (built by) your fathers to be destroyed.*

*Rav Moshe Feinstein points out an amazing anomaly. Rabbi Yishmael is bothered at the simple connotation of the verse that he does not interpret it at face value. He can hardly fathom that there are Jews who need to be told not to break stones in the Altar, or the Temple. Therefore, he expounds that this refers to Jews who sin, and cause the destruction of the Temple. Yet when the Torah warns about idolatry, adultery, or murder, Rabbi Yishmael is mute. He does not ask, "Is it possible that a Jew would murder or commit idolatry? He is not shocked at the need to warn against adultery. He does not reinterpret those verses homiletically and explain them in a poetic fashion. He is quite content with the admonition in its purest and most simple form. Though he can accept Jews committing murder, but he cannot accept them smashing synagogues. What is the difference?*

(Recently I heard this amazing story. However, I have changed the names of the parties involved and the location.)

**Velvel was infamous in his native Tarnograd. A notorious gangster, he not only transgressed the mitzvos, but mocked those who observed them. He really did not have much to do with the members of the community, if not to lure someone into a promising business deal, only to rob him of his ill-invested monies.**

**Velvel rarely visited the inside of the shul, save every few years on the yahrzeit of his pious father when the cobwebs of time were dusted off by the winds of guilt. Yes, Velvel was different than most of the villagers.**

**Except for early 1940, when he was no different than anyone else. The Nazis had overrun the town. They herded the community into the shul, and unfurled the Torah scrolls on the floor. Then they lined the people up and told them to march on the Torah, forcing them to spit on it as they past. And Velvel was right there amongst them. Velvel was a Jew and no different from anyone else.**

**Everyone lined up to obey and Velvel pushed to be first in line. And then he showed how special, how different he was. As he approached the Torah he stopped short, not even letting the tips of his soles touch the sacred parchment. Then he turned to the SS officer. "I don't tread on my Torah and I will never spit on it." They shot him on the spot, and like the rest of the villagers who followed suit, Velvel became a holy martyr.**

Rav Feinstein explains that there are icons of Judaism that are virtually impregnable. And so, Rabbi Yishmael can understand that one can be completely detached from Judaism, to the extent that he disregards all the mitzvos, and transgresses the most awful of its prohibitions. However, that Jew, no matter how low he has sunk, will never destroy even one brick of a synagogue! That is why Rabbi Yishmael must explain the verse not through its simple meaning, but through a pastoral interpretation.

The love of Judaism transcends performance of any single command. And no Jew who heeds some Torah warning, needs admonition against destroying all that his soul embodies. In this era of shattered icons and crumbling values, it is important to build on the embers of Yiddishkeit that are still glowing in the heart of every Jew.

Good Shabbos!

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### **Moving from the Real to the Ideal In the Time of Coronavirus** by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2020

The Torah commands us in the laws of Shmita for the first time in Shemot 23:11: "And six years you shall sow thy land, and shall gather in the fruits thereof. But the seventh year you shall relinquish it; that the poor of your people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner you shall deal with your vineyard, and with your oliveyard." The Shmita year is one in which we cease our working of the land to recognize that all that we have is God's. It is a year when the poor eat freely from the land and when all debts are released, a year of greater economic and social equality. The vision of Shmita is a utopian vision, but can it be translated into reality?

The mitzvah to free one's slaves presents a similar vision and a similar challenge. The very first in the long list of laws in Shemot states that any slave purchased must be freed following six years of servitude. This is the first law given to Bnei

Israel – newly-freed slaves themselves – by God, who declared at the theophany at Mount Sinai that, “I am the Lord your God who took you out of the Land of Egypt from the house of slavery” (Shemot, 20:2).

The message seems clear: An ideal society is one that has no slaves; no one person has a right to enslave another. This is a concept that Bnei Israel should understand more readily than anyone. The Torah, however, recognizes that they will not be able to live up to the ideal any time soon. In a world that was economically dependent on slavery and where slavery was the norm, the people could not be asked to abolish the practice immediately. For the ideal to translate into reality, some of the vision needed to be temporarily sacrificed. If you must purchase slaves, free them every seven years; don't own them fully as property; remember that they are human beings and that every human being deserves to be free. Yet the people could not even adhere to this compromise. The prophet Yirmiyahu admonishes the Israelites of his age for flagrant violation of this mitzvah. And they immediately regretted their decision when they did attempt to follow it, seizing those they had freed and forcibly returning them to servitude:

*Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel; I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondmen, saying, At the end of seven years let go every man his brother a Hebrew, which hath been sold unto you... but your fathers hearkened not unto me, neither inclined their ear... But you turned and polluted my name, and caused every man his servant... to return, and brought them into subjection, to be unto you for servants and for handmaids (Yirmiyahu, 34:13-16).*

The first challenge of translating any vision into reality is the serious demands that it makes on the people, demands that are not easily met. The reason and need for a new vision is obvious: there are deep, systemic problems in the current society, problems that are an outgrowth of the more selfish and self-serving parts of who we are. To make these systemic changes is to ask the people to live up to their better selves, with all the sacrifice that this might entail, is a tall order indeed. It is no surprise, then, that this translation into reality is an ongoing challenge when it comes to Shmita.

The Torah does not demand a society in which there is no private ownership, nor is there any reason to believe that this is the ideal. But it does demand releasing the land, as one releases slaves, every seven years in recognition that it is not only people that cannot be owned, that even one's very land, the property that a farmer labors and toils over, that she or he has the most profound connection to, even this land is ultimately God's.

This releasing, even if only for one year, is a hard thing. How can one survive without the year's harvest? To respond to these fears, God promises that the crop yield of the sixth year will be double that of the previous and that there will even be enough to last into the eighth year (Vayikra, 25:20-21). Much like the double portion of manna that fell on Friday, this not only addresses the people's fears but also cultivates another religious virtue – faith and trust in God. However, to put aside concerns over earning our livelihood for one day each week is itself no easy matter and has proven too difficult for some in the past. To do so for an entire year requires an even greater degree of faith. And, in fact, the people were not up to the challenge. Just one chapter after God's promise of a blessing of crops in the sixth year, the Torah says that the people will fail to observe the Shmita, and for this reason they will be sent into exile, “for the land did not rest when you were dwelling on it” (26:34-35).

This lack of observance was not confined to the early years of the nation. The Talmud reports widespread disregard of Shmita observance, not only by the amei ha'aretz, the common people and presumably the farmers, but even at times by the Kohanim, the more privileged and presumably more religiously observant class (Sanhedrin, 26a).

A vision sometimes fails because the people are not up to the task of making it a reality. But sometimes the problem is not one of implementation but of choosing between conflicting visions and values. This is true in the case of Shmita as well.

The Torah actually expresses two different visions of Shmita. We find one of these, “that the poor of your people may eat,” appearing in the context of not oppressing the stranger and letting slaves rest on Shabbat. It is a vision of social justice, of a society in which the poor and the marginalized are protected and cared for.

Here the key word is shmita, to release, to relinquish that which is ours to others. This is the same word that the Torah uses in mandating the release of debts during the Shmita year (Devarim, 15:1-3). In the verse from Parashat Shemot above, the Torah does not emphasize letting the land go fallow. Instead, the focus is on giving the land's produce to the poor. It is even possible to read these verses as indicating that the land can be worked; the farmer simply cannot possess

the crops that it produces. That is, for six years you work the land and gather the produce for yourself, but on the seventh year, you release your possession of the land and what it brings forth, allowing all the poor to eat from it.

The story is different in Vayikra. There, Shmita is called Shabbat, and it represents a Shabbat for the land. This is a religious vision, not one of social justice. We pull back for God's sake. We stop work to recognize God's true ownership of the land. And we refrain from exerting our mastery over the earth, ceasing to constantly project ourselves onto the larger world. This is not a message of social equality or feeding the poor. It is a message of Shabbat.

Each of these visions is compelling, but they can function at cross-purposes. What good does it do the poor to have the crops released if farmers haven't been working the land? The poor would rather the owner work the land and relinquish the produce. In fact, the Talmud relates that the Jews left certain regions of the land unsanctified when they returned to the Land of Israel in the time of Ezra so that it could be worked during Shmita, supporting the poor from the tithes of that produce (Beitza, 3b). Think of the irony! It was better for the poor if Shmita did not apply, if they received only 10% of a normal year's produce rather than 100% of what grew without cultivation during Shmita.

The challenge of competing visions is also at play in Hillel's famous institution of *pruzbol*. The Torah had two goals: to ensure that people would lend to the poor and to free people from their debts every seven years. Hillel saw that these goals were not compatible, that people were not lending money because the debt would only be annulled. In response, he developed a halakhic mechanism that would ensure that at least one of the goals was being realized, that the poor would be provided for.

The Torah holds out a vision of a more perfect world and demands that we begin to realize it in our own lives. This is hard at all times, but particularly so in the age of coronavirus. How do we begin to change the world for the better when our lives are so detached from that world, and when we are not embedded in society as we once were? It is possible however that what looks like an obstacle is actually a door that is being opened. We are living in a time when someone has hit a big "reset" button on our lives. Deep societal problems – such as racism, inequality, and health care – have now risen to our collective consciousness and it now looks like change may actually take place. We know that things will look different when we come out on the other side of this, and we can be a part of making that "different" something better.

As we look towards the next Shmitta year (5782/2021), which begins in a short year from this Rosh HaShana, let us think about what an ideal society, true to its vision and values, might look like. And let us work to realize and seize the opportunities that have now opened up, to bring society from the real that much closer to the ideal.

Shabbat Shalom!

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## **Parshas Re'eh -- The Fisherman Who Got Away**

by Rabbi Mordechai Rhine © 2016 Teach 613

As we near the conclusion of the Torah-reading cycle, the Torah informs us that the stakes are high. One who is righteous will be rewarded; one who is fishing with a wicked rod will be punished. The Torah states this in very clear terms. "See, I am placing before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing if you obey; the curse if you do not" One wonders: Is there no middle ground? Can't I just be average?

Indeed, the commentaries tell us that the Torah's message is that we should not live our lives in neutral. "See!" the Torah demands of us. Pay attention! Live life with focus and with blessing. There is no "middle ground." Even when you do things that seem "average," do them with positive intent. When you are shopping, when you are involved in business, even when you drive your car, don't just do it. Make every effort to do things-even mundane things- in a way that sanctifies G-d's Name.

In my recent summer travels I had the privilege to meet a gentleman by the name of Gary. My wife and I were walking pleasantly on the dock at a river. Gary was fishing. I don't know if it was my yarmulka, or perhaps my tzitzis that he saw, but he made eye contact with me and made small talk about the weather.

As the gentle evening breeze rustled the leaves, we stood absorbing the pleasant scene of the river, the boats, and the people strolling on the dock. I said to him, "You must enjoy fishing." He said, "Yes, very much." And as we stood there quietly, he looked up at me and said, "You are probably wondering why I am not catching any fish."

Before I could say anything, he leaned over to his supply box and showed me a pliers, and the hooks which he had straightened and blunted. He said, "I go fishing to relax. The last thing that I want to do is to catch a fish. Then I would have to clean it and cook it. When I am on vacation I like to eat out. So I straighten the hooks before I set them in the water."

I smiled and wished him well. But all evening his insightful comment whirled in my head. "He doesn't go fishing to catch fish. He goes fishing to relax."

This week's Torah portion demands that we pay attention as to why we do things. "See!" Pay attention! Do not live life without thinking about what you are doing.

It is a great lesson- a moshol. Let me give you some examples.

We all know why a person has a job: "To make money," of course. But if the only reason to have a job is to make money, why doesn't G-d- who is all powerful- just give you the money that you need. And why do people still work even after they have enough money for retirement and beyond?

The commentaries maintain that one of the reasons that G-d created the concept called "work" is to keep us busy and out of trouble. Ask seniors who volunteer. They will tell you. A job is not just to make money. A job is to give a person a sense of purpose. It gives one the opportunity to make a difference.

Consider prayer as another example. We all know why we pray. "To get something." Yet Jewish literature indicates the opposite. "Why were the Matriarchs barren? Because G-d likes to hear the prayer of righteous people." The need is not a mistake. The need exists as a catalyst for communication with G-d.

In fact, the Torah doesn't promise that all our prayers will be answered as we see fit. But it does promise: "G-d is close to all those who call to him sincerely." As King Shlomo stated, "G-d is your friend, and your father's friend." He has a good track record. Prayer isn't about getting what we want as we see fit. Prayer is about communicating. It is about having a trusted friend with Whom to share life, even in the most difficult of times.

When the Torah states, "See," it is telling us to pay attention to why we do things. It is an important lesson. Because if you take the time to think about it, the obvious reason isn't necessarily the real reason that we do things.

Some people don't go fishing to catch fish. They go fishing to relax.

Some people don't have a job just to make money. They have a job to be busy and productive.

Some people don't pray to get things. They pray to come closer to G-d.

Certainly if you do these things you may end up catching fish, making money, or getting what you prayed for. But, as in the case of prayer, travelling life in G-d's company is itself a worthwhile endeavor.

The Torah tells us that things may not be what they are often understood to be. "See," and pay attention, "For I place before you today a world of blessing." See, and make a choice. "You shall choose life."

With best wishes for a wonderful Shabbos.

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## Good, Bad, or Both: Thoughts for Parashat Re'eh

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel\*

Are human beings basically animals who need to be tamed by the forces of civilization? Or are humans angelic beings who sometimes get dragged down by the external forces of nature?

Thomas Hobbes coined the proverb that *homo homini lupus*, “man is wolf to man.” We can’t trust each other—or ourselves!—to act in a non-wolf-like pattern; we need to be controlled by laws, to be forced to behave morally. The role of religion and civilization is to curb our innate tendency toward aggression and violence.

On the other hand, some argue that humans are innately kind and cooperative; we descend into violent behavior because of pressures from outside ourselves e.g. feeling threatened by others, living in an environment of poverty or drug addiction. If we could clean up the external negative features of society, we would all live nice, quiet, moral lives.

Proponents of the Hobbesian view draw on the notion of “survival of the fittest.” According to this theory, humans (and indeed all animals) are engaged in an ongoing struggle for survival. There is a never-ending competition for resources; only the strongest prevail and reproduce. Weaker animals are killed or die out. Thus, the best strategy for survival is to destroy the competition.

Yet, this theory has been seriously challenged by a growing number of contemporary researchers. In his important writings, Frans de Waal has provided evidence to demonstrate that animals—including human beings—actually enhance their prospects for survival by cooperative behavior. By working together with others, they are better able to maintain the safety and security of their groups. In his book, “The Age of Empathy,” he points to nature’s lessons for a kinder society. Being nice is not only an abstract moral principle; it is a key ingredient for survival and happiness. In his book, “Beyond Revenge,” Michael McCullough has described the evolution of the forgiveness instinct. Just as we have an urge to take revenge, we also have a strong streak within us that encourages us to forgive.

Jewish tradition has long understood that human beings are complex, that we have both positive and negative inclinations. Judaism does not view humanity as a group of individuals struggling for survival by engaging in wolf-like aggression against others; nor does it view humanity as an innately peace-loving, altruistic group.

We like to think that we are essentially good and that we have the power to overcome our evil inclinations. In this week’s Torah portion, we find the instruction to share with the poor. “You shall not harden your heart nor clench your fist from your needy brother (Devarim 15:7).” Rabbi Yitzhak Shemuel Reggio, a 19th century Italian Torah commentator, notes: “One who holds himself back from helping a poor and impoverished person needs to harden his heart, because compassion is part of human nature.” In other words, we are essentially good, compassionate individuals who naturally want to help others. Only by hardening our hearts can we overcome our natural tendency to do good.

This optimistic assessment of human nature was alluded to in a comment attributed to Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik. The Rav noted that according to Freudian psychology, human beings at root are filled with animal instincts. If you scratch deeply enough into the human psyche, you will find aggressiveness, hostility, jealousy. The Rav contrasted this viewpoint with the classic Jewish teaching. If you go as deeply as possible into the human psyche, you will find holiness, a profound crying out for God. As the Psalmist declared: *Mimaamakim keratikha Hashem*, from our very depths we call out to God.

This week’s Torah portion reminds us of the obligation to do that which is upright and good, to live a morally responsible and respectable life. The optimistic Jewish view suggests that these are goals to which we are naturally disposed. We only sin if we deviate from our basic desire to live generously and compassionately. Yes, we do have negative inclinations, and yes, these inclinations can drag us down. But the hallmark of a truly religious person is the recognition that at root and in our depths we are endowed with a grand spirituality that is the key to an upright, good and happy life.

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\* Jewishideas.org.

## **Parshas Re'ey**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer\*

This week's Parsha begins with a perplexing passuk – "See I have placed before you blessing and curse." (Devarim 11:26) Why do we need to be told to "see" to focus and take note of the blessings and curses? Certainly anyone who hears the blessings and curses promised for observing or violating the Torah will be aware of them. Why is Moshe asking us to take note? What is it that he wishes us to "see"?

The Medrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 4:1) teaches us that Moshe is enjoining us to take note of the nature and purpose of these blessings and curses. "The Holy One, Blessed is He, said 'It is not for their detriment that I have given them blessings and curses, but to make known to them which is the good path that they should choose in order that they should take reward.'" Moshe wants us to see that these blessings and curses have a higher purpose and are not merely to force us into following Hashem's way. Hashem didn't simply tell us of our obligations, but also gave us deterrents and incentives to help guide us along the way.

The Maharz"u (ibid.) points out that this answer does not fully answer the question. While, we now understand why Moshe was asking us to "see" and properly understand the curses, why was Moshe also asking us to "see" the blessings? The Medrash itself says that G-d felt the need to clarify not only the curses, but also the blessings – "It is not for their detriment that I have given them blessings and curses". How could blessings possibly be to our detriment? What harm could there be in receiving reward?

The Maharz"u explains that there is a deeper lesson to be learned from the blessings than that which is learned from the curses. Blessings and incentives are not always beneficial to the recipient. If one has certain goals in mind but is told that they must achieve other foreign goals to receive blessing, then the blessing is nothing more than a distraction. There are many who prefer excitement and pleasure over material gain. If one wants to live for this world alone, one may decide that a life of pleasure-seeking and thrills is the wealth and bliss they prefer. For such a person, the blessings for following G-d's Torah could indeed be considered detrimental. These blessings of prosperity and peace are contingent on living a different life. This person may feel he is being distracted or even coerced away from the life and joy he truly seeks.

It is specifically with this in mind that Moshe is telling us "See that I have placed before you blessings and curses." Take note of both the blessings and the curses and understand that they come from the G-d Who took you out of Egypt and sustained you throughout the travels in the desert. The G-d Who created and maintains Heaven and Earth, ecosystems and universes, the G-d who gives each of us life day in and day out surely would not be giving us blessings and curses for our detriment. "See" this, says Moshe, and understand that there is a higher purpose not only to the curses, but also a higher purpose to the blessings.

The Maharz"u explains that the blessings themselves are not the goal, but rather there is a better more pristine and complete joy both in this world and in the World to Come. The blessings are merely intended as a tool to compensate for the other joys and pleasures of this world which may blind us to the greater meaning of life. In this context, the blessings are certainly not for our detriment. On the contrary, the blessings are there to save us from getting distracted with the fleeting pleasures and to know which is the path that leads to the true joy and pleasure for which G-d created the world and created us.

We must take heed of Moshe's words and "see" and understand the message of the blessings which G-d has given us. The true goal is not the blessings themselves. The true goal is developing our true selves, achieving the nobility of G-dliness and reaping the ultimate benefits of closeness with the Eternal G-d.

\* Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD.

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## **Emotional Resilience During Covid-19**

by Rabbi Moshe Rube\*

The phrase "Rabbi, I'm ready for this to be over." has been said to me a few times over the past week or two. Since March, the world has been turned upside down by the coronavirus and we've all been sent scrambling, searching for answers and arguing over the best ways to fight this new enemy. But now, it seems we've reached a point of fatigue. Not



in the sense that we are being less cautious but in more of an emotional sense of "it's just time to get back to normal. When can that happen?" The human being cannot remain in a sense of frenzy all the time, and we're just exhausted from it all already. The prayer of 'Chadeish Yamenu Kikedem" (Renew our days like how it was before) has taken on a new meaning. So what do we do to continue moving forward and keep ourselves emotionally healthy and resilient?

Now one thing I can do is tell stories of how the pandemic has brought families closer, or how in the long run this experience will be good for humanity, God has a plan and we just don't see all the pieces yet, etc. But to me these answers do not satisfy. Perhaps in twenty years with the power of hindsight they will, but for us who are experiencing this now, we require a different type of explanation.

Let me quote a story to you from Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin's "Stories of the Chassidim." Like in many stories, the point of this being historically factual is irrelevant in the face of the ultimate goal, which is to communicate a deep truth about Torah and the human condition. (And of course we don't need to identify as a chassid to appreciate it any more than we need to identify as a "Litvak" to appreciate the religious value of science and philosophy.)

"There was once a man who related to his friends that he had studied thirty-six interpretations of Isaiah 40:26, "Lift up your eyes to heaven and see Who created these" and found them wanting. He then started studying Chassidut and found the correct way to see this verse. His friends asked him, "So what is the Chassidic explanation?" He answered the Chassidic explanation of this verse is "Lift up your eyes to heaven and see Who created these." His friends replied, "That's good but maybe you should write it down so others can benefit." The man shook his head and said "I will not, for then it would become the thirty-seventh interpretation."

No amount of interpretation can replicate the awe inspiring experience of seeing a heaven full of stars. If we were looking at such a sight with others and one of our friends started talking about planetary motion and gravity, most likely we would give him an old-fashioned "Shush." We seek to process these experiences fully.

We know this regarding positive experiences but we do not employ such methods as easily when it comes to negative ones. Ironically though, that's where healing and resilience reside.

Last night SEED hosted one of my teachers and mentors, Dr. David Pelcovitz, to talk about emotional strength during quarantine. He made his main point by quoting noted positive psychologist Tal Ben Schachar, who taught an overbooked class in Harvard on the Principles of Happiness for over 20 years. Dr. Ben Schachar stated that "All emotions flow through one pipeline. If I block one I am not allowing joy and love room to dwell". In other words, we need to fully immerse ourselves in all of our experiences if we want to experience joy and build mental resilience. Building this mindfulness and processing everything we're going through fully like we would when standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon is one of our best tools for emotional well-being. Dr. Pelcovitz followed with a quote from Golda Meir, "Those who don't know how to weep with a full heart don't know how to laugh either."

So as we continue to face the coronavirus, I say to myself and all of us that we should immerse yourself in all we experience. We're alive. We live during this time and this is what's happening. We're doing whatever we can and whatever comes we will allow it to flow.

Interpretations can be offered but they do not have to block our pipelines.

\* Rabbi, Knesseth Israel Congregation, Birmingham, AL

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## **Rights and Responsibilities: Thoughts for Parashat Re'eh**

by Jonathan Arking\*

Among the most universal values, dating back thousands of years to a myriad of ethical and religious traditions, is the "golden rule." Stated positively, it is "treat others as you would have others treat you," and negatively as "do not treat others in ways you would not want to be treated." Yet while these maxims seem similar in content, there is a wide distinction in outlooks and obligations created by each one. The most notable difference between the two versions is in the approach toward passivity. While the positive formulation of the golden rule mandates that you apply yourself to help someone in need, the negative formulation does not--caring not whether you help, so long as you do no harm. These two

differing attitudes can be succinctly termed social responsibility, having an obligation toward all others we interact with, and hyperindividualism, live and let live.

In this week's parasha, Re'eh, we read a verse that reads "You shall not act at all as we now act here, every man as he pleases." To those familiar with the book of Judges, the literary connection is immediate. It is an almost identical line that punctuates the book of Judges, a book characterized by anarchy, sin, and political strife. The book culminates in one of the most horrific stories in the entire Bible, the Pilegish B'giva, and a civil war in which nearly the entire tribe of Benjamin is wiped out. The concluding verse of the book is "In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased." This phrase, "everyone did as he pleased" might be read as an extreme form of individualism. While some of the direct actions in the narratives may have violated the negative formulation of the golden rule, a society in which "everyone did as he pleased" is directly what it calls for. This is a clear warning about the perils of hyperindividualism.

Later in the parasha, we see the Torah's insistence on social responsibility not just alluded to, but explicitly commanded. After relaying the command to remit all debts every seventh year, the Torah states: "There shall be no needy among you" - in other words, it is incumbent upon you to create a society in which none are needy. This verse, along with the institution of the remission of debts, are commands aimed at society more generally, not specifically at the individual. Yet, the individual, too, has a personal obligation: "If, however, there is a needy person among you, one of your kinsmen in any of your settlements in the land that the Lord your God is giving you, do not harden your heart and shut your hand against your needy kinsman."

It can be very easy to fall into the trap of the negative formation of the golden rule -- "I am not hurting anyone, so there is no element of moral obligation in my decisions." In religious contexts, this can manifest in prioritizing one's own religious experience at the expense of being involved in "yishuvo shel olam", the building of society. But Judaism rebukes this approach, both through the tragic narratives of Judges, and the Torah's commands to both establish an economically just system, and to directly aid those in need. As Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks writes, "The message of the Hebrew Bible is that serving God and serving our fellow human beings are inseparably linked." We are obligated not just to worry about ourselves, but to do our part in improving society and working to create a world in which "there shall be no needy among you."

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## **Rav Kook Torah**

### **Re'eh: Uprooting Idolatry in the Land of Israel**

As a condition for inheriting the Land of Israel, the Torah demands that all forms of idolatry be destroyed:

*"You shall utterly destroy all the places where the nations whom you are driving out worship their gods.... You must tear down their altars, break up their sacred pillars, burn their Asheirah trees, and chop down the statues of their gods. You must obliterate their names from that place." (Deut. 12:2-3)*

The Torah stresses that this obligation to destroy idolatrous artifacts is primarily binding in the Land of Israel. As the Sages commented on the words, "You will obliterate their names from that place":

*"In the Land of Israel you are commanded to pursue idolatry [until it is totally eradicated], but not outside the Land." (Sifri; see Maimonides, Laws of Idolatry 7:2)*

Idolatry is clearly the antithesis of Judaism's message of monotheism. The imperative to fight idolatry should not be limited to a particular location. So why does the Torah confine the eradication of idolatry to the Land of Israel?

### **Opposing Worldviews**

The conflict between monotheism and idolatry is a contest between two fundamentally opposing worldviews. Idolatry sees the world as divided and fragmented, a place where competing gods/forces of nature clash and struggle with one another.

In this bleak worldview, the material outweighs the spiritual, and life is reduced to the pursuit of physical wants.

Monotheism, on the other hand, teaches that the world has an underlying unity. As one's sense of the universe's inner harmony deepens, one's longing for the spiritual grows stronger. Higher aspirations take on greater significance; the world advances and is progressively enlightened.

### **The Land of Israel and Monotheism**

The Sages wrote that "The air of the Land of Israel makes one wise" (Baba Batra 158b). Eretz Yisrael is bound to the spiritual life of Israel, the Torah; and the essence of the Torah's wisdom is the inner truth of a united reality. The special atmosphere of the Land of Israel instills greater awareness of the world's unified foundation. For this reason, obliteration of idolatry is especially important in the Land of Israel.

Outside the Land of Israel, the harmonious vision of a unified world cannot be fully revealed. There, a fragmented worldview reigns, emphasizing division and isolation. A grim sense of existential estrangement pervades all aspects of life. Any attempt to reveal the hidden unity of the world is hindered by the "impurity of the lands of the nations." The lands outside of Israel suffer from the foul odor of idolatry. The Sages wrote that Jews living outside the Land are "idol-worshippers in purity" (Avodah Zarah 8a). In other words, they are unintentionally influenced by the cultural environment of the foreign countries in which they live.

This distinction is also manifest in the difference between the Torah of Eretz Yisrael and the Torah of the exile. The Torah outside the Land excels in detailed arguments and the fine dialectics of pilpul. Its qualities reflect the general sense of divisiveness felt there.<sup>1</sup> The Torah of the Land of Israel, on the other hand, is illuminated by a lofty wisdom that connects the details to their governing moral principles. "There is no Torah like the Torah of the Land of Israel" (Breishit Rabbah 16:7).

Only by residing in the Land of Israel can one be truly free from the influence of idolatry. The Torah explicitly links living in the Land and monotheistic faith:

"I took you out from the Land of Egypt in order to give you the Land of Canaan, to be your God" (Lev. 25:38).

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Orot HaKodesh vol. II, pp. 423-424.)

<sup>1</sup> "Rabbi Oshaia taught: No'am refers to the scholars of Eretz Yisrael, who treat each other graciously (מנעימים) when engaged in halachic debates. Chovlim refers to the scholars of Babylon, who attack (מחבילים) each other when debating halachic issues" (Sanhedrin 24a).

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## **Multi-Layered Festivals**

By Menachem Feldman\*

Virtually all ancient cultures had festivals celebrating the agricultural harvest, paying tribute to nature's bounty. Judaism's three pilgrimage festivals, discussed in this week's Torah portion, capture a far deeper perspective. On the one hand, the festivals coincide with the natural agricultural cycle: Passover is a celebration of the spring, Shavuot of the harvest, and Sukkot of the ingathering of the produce. Yet these same agricultural festivals also commemorate historic events that celebrate not nature, but rather the miraculous relationship between the Jewish people and G d. Passover is the commemoration of the miraculous Exodus, Shavuot is a commemoration of the Divine revelation at Sinai, and Sukkot is a celebration that follows the Divine atonement of Yom Kippur.

In Judaism, the natural and the miraculous are not a dichotomy. For nature is not an independent force, but rather it is an expression of the Divine creative power.

The Chassidic teachings further elaborate on this idea. The Kabbalah teaches that the physical reality is a mirror of the spiritual reality. Thus, the Jewish agricultural festivals are a multi-layered commemoration. They come to celebrate the material bounty of the harvest, but they also celebrate a spiritual harvest, the reaping of the spiritual produce.

Passover, celebration of the Exodus, is in the spring. Spring is the time when the wheat begins to ripen, yet it has not

matured to the point where it can be harvested and taken home. This holiday is a celebration of potentiality. It is a celebration in anticipation of the ripening produce. The same is true regarding the spiritual growth process. The Ten Plagues, the Exodus, the Splitting of the Sea, occurred not because the Jewish people were deserving of these incredible miracles, but rather in anticipation of the spiritual heights they would achieve in the future through receiving the Torah and implementing its teachings in their life.

The Shavuot holiday is the celebration of the harvest. Although the wheat is not yet in our home, we nevertheless celebrate the tangible gift of the produce we have been blessed with, which we can now hold in our hands. Likewise, Shavuot is the time when we receive the Torah. While we did not "bring the Torah home" by internalizing its teachings, we have the gift in our hands. We can begin the process of incorporating its teachings and inspiration.

And finally, on the holiday of Sukkot, our joy is complete, because the produce has been gathered into our home. It is now ours to enjoy. Just as it is with the produce of the field, so too it is with the produce of our spiritual toil and effort. Sukkot is the celebration of the internalization of the Torah. During the months between the Giving of the Torah and Yom Kippur, the Jewish people betrayed the Torah by creating the Golden Calf. Then, on Yom Kippur, G-d forgave them and gave them the second Tablets. We realize that our relationship with G-d is unconditional. Even if we stumble, we are able to reconnect to the Torah, for at our core, the Torah, our soul and G-d are all one. We realize that the "produce," the relationship we are creating with G-d, is "in our home." It has been internalized to the point that it can survive any challenge and overcome any distraction. The produce has been "gathered in."<sup>1</sup>

1. Adapted from Likutei Sichot, vol. 29.

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## **An Insight on Parshat Re'eh: How to Give: A Life Lesson**

By Baruch S. Davidson\*

***...According to the generosity with which you will give...Each man according to his ability to gift, consistent with the blessing of the L-rd your G-d." (Devarim 16:10-17)***

### **Expectations**

The Torah instructs us here about two different types of giving: one is described as stemming from a sense of "generosity," and the other is "according to your ability to gift."

These correspond to two different approaches toward charity giving, which often reflect the financial means of the individual. First, the Torah addresses a person who is not particularly wealthy, and who could easily justify using all his earnings for his own needs and the needs of his dependents. In this case the Torah appeals to his generosity, telling him to be benevolent and give even more than can be expected of him.

With the instruction to give "according to your ability to gift," however, the Torah demands more than generosity. Here the Torah addresses one who is affluent and is aware that G-d has blessed him with wealth well beyond his needs. Presumably, this person also knows that G-d provides sustenance for all humanity; some have the good fortune of earning it on their own, and some must rely on the generosity of others in order to receive the sustenance intended for them. He therefore understands that G-d has not only provided him wealth to support himself, He also appointed him custodian over funds intended for others, and it is therefore logical for him to be charitable. In this instance, it is not necessary for the Torah to expect that he be generous--for he already knows that the money is intended for charity, and does not even regard it as his own. Instead, the Torah addresses the cordiality with which he gives, and instructs him not to give grudgingly, but "according to his ability to gift"--with the warmth and friendliness of a person giving a gift to a friend.

– Kehot's Light Points (forthcoming)

\* **An Insight from the Rebbe.**

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Volume 26, Issue 41

Shabbat Parashat Reeh

5780 B"H

## Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

### Collective Joy

If we were to ask what key word epitomises the society Jews were to make in the Promised Land, several concepts would come to mind: justice, compassion, reverence, respect, holiness, responsibility, dignity, loyalty. Surprisingly, though, another word figures centrally in Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy. It is a word that appears only once in each of the other books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers.[1] Yet it appears twelve times in Deuteronomy, seven of them in Parshat Re'eh. The word is simcha, joy.

It is an unexpected word. The story of the Israelites thus far has not been a joyous one. It has been marked by suffering on the one hand, rebellion and dissension on the other. Yet Moses makes it eminently clear that joy is what the life of faith in the land of promise is about. Here are the seven instances in this parsha, and their contexts:

The central Sanctuary, initially Shilo: "There in the presence of the Lord your God you and your families shall eat and rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you" (Deut. 12:7).

Jerusalem and the Temple: "And there you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites from your towns" (Deut. 12:12).

Sacred food that may be eaten only in Jerusalem: "Eat them in the presence of the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will choose – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites from your towns – and you are to rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you put your hand to" (Deut. 12:18).

The second tithe: "Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine, or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice" (Deut. 14:26).

The festival of Shavuot: "And rejoice before the Lord your God at the place He will choose as a dwelling for His name – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows living among you" (Deut. 16:11).

The festival of Succot: "Be joyful at your feast – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows who live in your towns" (Deut. 16:14).

Succot, again. "For seven days, celebrate the feast to the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete [vehayita ach same'ach]" (Deut. 16:15).

Why does Moses emphasise joy specifically in the book of Deuteronomy? Perhaps because is there, in the speeches Moses delivered in the last month of his life, that he scaled the heights of prophetic vision never reached by anyone else before or since. It is as if, standing on a mountaintop, he sees the whole course of Jewish history unfold below him, and from that dizzying altitude he brings back a message to the people gathered around him: the next generation, the children of those he led out of Egypt, the people who will cross the Jordan he will not cross and enter the land he is only able to see from afar.

What he tells them is unexpected, counter-intuitive. In effect he says this: "You know what your parents suffered. You have heard about their slavery in Egypt. You yourselves have known what it is to wander in the wilderness without a home or shelter or security. You may think those were the greatest trials, but you are wrong. You are about to face a harder trial. The real test is security and contentment."

Absurd though this sounds, it has proved true throughout Jewish history. In the many centuries of dispersion and persecution, from the destruction of the Second Temple to the nineteenth century, no one raised doubts about Jewish continuity. They did not ask, "Will we have Jewish grandchildren?" Only since Jews achieved freedom and equality in the Diaspora and independence and sovereignty in the State of Israel has that question come to be asked. When Jews had little to thank God for, they thanked Him, prayed to Him, and came to the synagogue and the house of study to hear and heed His word. When they had everything to thank Him for, many turned their backs on the synagogue and the house of study.

Moses was giving prophetic expression to the great paradox of faith: It is easy to speak to God in tears. It is hard to serve God in joy. It is the warning he delivered as the people came within sight of their destination: the Promised Land. Once there, they were in danger of forgetting that the land was theirs only because of God's promise to them, and only for as long as they remembered their promise to God.

Simcha is usually translated as joy, rejoicing, gladness, happiness, pleasure, or delight. In

fact, simcha has a nuance untranslatable into English. Joy, happiness, pleasure, and the like are all states of mind, emotions. They belong to the individual. We can feel them alone. Simcha, by contrast, is not a private emotion. It means happiness shared. It is a social state, a predicate of "we," not "I." There is no such thing as feeling simcha alone.

Moses repeatedly labours the point. When you rejoice, he says time and again, it must be "you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows in your towns." A key theme of Parshat Re'eh is the idea of a central Sanctuary "in the place the Lord your God will choose." As we know from later Jewish history, during the reign of King David, this place was Jerusalem, where David's son Solomon eventually built the Temple.

What Moses is articulating for the first time is the idea of simcha as communal, social, and national rejoicing. The nation was to be brought together not just by crisis, catastrophe, or impending war, but by collective celebration in the presence of God. The celebration itself was to be deeply moral. Not only was this a religious act of thanksgiving; it was also to be a form of social inclusion. No one was to be left out: not the stranger, or the servant, or the lonely (the orphan and widow). In a remarkable passage in the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides makes this point in the strongest possible terms:

And while one eats and drinks, it is their duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for those who lock the doors to their courtyard, eating and drinking with their family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul – their meal is not a rejoicing in a Divine commandment, but a rejoicing only in their own stomach. It is of such persons that Scripture says, "Their sacrifices shall be to them as the bread of mourners, all that eat thereof shall be polluted; for their bread is a disgrace to their own appetite" (Hos. 9:4). Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it, as Scripture says, "And I will spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your sacrifices" (Mal. 2:3).[2]

Moses' insight remains valid today. The West is more affluent than any previous society has

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ever been. Our life expectancy is longer, our standards of living higher, and our choices wider than at any time since Homo sapiens first walked on earth. Yet Western societies are not measurably happier. The most telling indices of unhappiness – drug and alcohol abuse, depressive illness, stress-related syndromes, eating disorders, and the rest – have risen by between 300 and 1,000 per cent in the space of two generations. Why so?

In 1968 I met the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory, for the first time. While I was there, the Chassidim told me the following story. A man had written to the Rebbe in roughly these terms: “I am depressed. I am lonely. I feel that life is meaningless. I try to pray, but the words do not come. I keep mitzvot but find no peace of mind. I need the Rebbe’s help.” The Rebbe sent a brilliant reply without using a single word. He simply circled the first word of every sentence and sent the letter back. The word in each case was “I.”

Our contemporary consumer is constructed in the first-person singular: I want, I need, I must have. There are many things we can achieve in the first-person singular but one we cannot, namely, simcha – because simcha is the joy we share, the joy we have only because we share. That, said Moses before the Israelites entered their land, would be their greatest challenge. Suffering, persecution, a common enemy, unite a people and turn it into a nation. But freedom, affluence, and security turn a nation into a collection of individuals, each pursuing his or her own happiness, often indifferent to the fate of those who have less, the lonely, the marginal, and the excluded. When that happens, societies start to disintegrate. At the height of their good fortune, the long slow process of decline begins.

The only way to avoid it, said Moses, is to share your happiness with others, and, in the midst of that collective, national celebration, serve God.[3] Blessings are not measured by how much we own or earn or spend or possess but by how much we share. Simcha is the mark of a sacred society. It is a place of collective joy.

[1] Gen. 31:27; Ex. 4:14; Lev. 23:40; Num. 10:10.

[2] Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18.

[3] The great French sociologist Émile Durkheim (whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all rabbis) argued, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (trans. Karen E. Fields [New York: Free Press, 1995]), that religion is born in the experience of “collective effervescence,” which is closely related to simcha in the biblical sense.

### **Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

“If there will arise in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he gives you a sign or a convincing manifestation, and this sign or convincing manifestation which he had announced to you occurred; (And he utilized what appeared to be this miraculous occurrence) to say ‘Let us follow after other

gods...’ you must not hearken to the words of that “prophet”... After your God shall you walk, Him shall you revere, keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him and cleave unto Him...” (Deuteronomy 13:2-5).

From the earliest Biblical times, Judaism – a moral and enlightened religion based upon an ethical monotheism which taught justice, compassion and peace – was forced to struggle against idolatrous voodoo and magic. Apparently the more mysterious, uncertain and fragile life appeared to be, the greater the attraction to follow wonder – working, prophecy – speaking individuals who claimed a “local telephone” relationship to the Divine or to the various divinities in which they believed.

Fascinatingly enough, the twelfth century Commentary Ramban (Nachmanides) admits of the possibility that there do exist gifted individuals with what we would consider to be prophetic powers: “Possibly the Biblical text is hinting at a true phenomenon, that souls of several individuals have the prophetic power to know the future, and not one really knows the source of that power... an inner spirit comes to that individual saying that such and such will occur in the future to a certain object... and the matter proves to be true to those who see it happen...” (Ramban, ad loc). Nevertheless, if such a prophecy is used to turn someone away from the laws of Torah, the soothsayer is considered to be a malevolent idolater. Indeed, the entire introduction to this description of a false prophet is the Biblical insistence upon the ultimate truth of our Torah, “a Judicial code which dare not be compromised, not even by abilities to predict future events on the basis of heavenly voices: “Every word which I have commanded you, you must observe to perform; do not add to it and do not distract from it” (Deut 13:1). No one, not even the most gifted oracle, can rise above the authority and supremacy of our Torah!

Maimonides is likewise very stringent in defining all forms of idolatry. Our Bible insists that “there shall not be found among you... any soothsayer (Kosem), astrologer, enchanter or sorcerer” (Deut 18:10), and our great Spanish legalist – philosopher explains a Kosem as “one who does an act in order to free his mind from all distractions so that he can predict future events, and he says that something will occur or will not occur” (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry, 11,6). Indeed, there may be individuals with such abilities, but that does not necessarily mean that such soothsayers have proper moral judgment or give wise halakhic counsel.

From this perspective we can readily understand why our tradition insists that “the Torah is no longer in heaven,” so we do not listen to heavenly voices (B.T. Bava Metzia 59b) and “the Sage is to be preferred over the prophet” (Bava Batra 12b); our religio-legal

## **Likutei Divrei Torah**

system, albeit based upon a law which we believe to be the word of the Living God, nevertheless is interpreted and developed in each generation predicated upon logically sound principles and analytically sound explications. Reasoned Responsa are open to scholarly debate, and no one can claim the forensic edge because he heard a voice from Heaven. Hence the continuity of our tradition remains insured, with legal interpretations based upon traditionally ordained logic – no one has the ability to undermine our sacred texts by a newly revealed addendum or substitute.

I believe that there is an even more profound reason for our rejection of fortune tellers, even deeply religious fortune tellers who do not use their “gifts” to undermine our tradition. The Bible itself teaches “the secrets are for the Lord our God and that which is revealed is for us and our descendants forever to perform all the words of this Torah” (Deut. 29:28). Our task is not to second-guess God, or to use our religion or our religious leaders to make our lives easier or more certain, to remove human doubt or vulnerability. The commandments are here for us to serve God, not in order to attempt to have God serve us. Hence the Mishnah teaches that “we are to serve our Master not in order to receive a reward” (Avot 1), but because it is right to serve Him and will ultimately make for a better world – not necessarily an easier individual life. Faith is not a guarantee that my life will be comfortable and cancer – free, if I do what the Torah commands; faith rather demands faithfulness to God’s desired life-style no matter how difficult or challenging my individual life may be. As Yossele Rakover, supposed victim of the Warsaw Ghetto poignantly writes in his last Will and Testament: “You have done everything possible to make me stop believing in You and maintaining your commandments. But, my wrathful God, it will not avail You in the least. I will never stop believing you, never stop loving You. Who then shall I believe in, the cruel God (or non-god) of my enemies? Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokenu, Hashem Ehad.”

Similar to this must be our attitude to Prayer. We believe in a Higher Being who can certainly make the miraculous occur, but who only guaranteed that the Jewish people would never be completely destroyed, and that eventually the world will accept a God of peace and moral justice emanating from the ethics of our eternal Torah. Otherwise in large measure, the world operates according to its natural design. Yes, “even if a sword is dangling at your throat, do not despair of God’s compassion,” but – at that same time – “do not rely on miracles.” Pray for the best, but prepare for the worst.

The very practical Talmudic passage in Berachot (B.T. 32b.) teaches us that “one who prays too long and intensively will come to a pained heart,” and the Tosafot commentary interprets this to apply to an individual who

expects his prayer to be answered. What is the repair for such a broken heart?, queries the Talmud. Occupy yourself in the performance of the commandments to serve God and try to improve society.

Our religious community must close its ears to future predictions of all sorts, no matter how pious the source. Ultimately we have but one Source, and He teaches us that “the secrets are for the Lord our God alone, and that which is revealed – to perform all the words of this Torah – is for us and our children”.

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### **The Person in the Parsha Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

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#### **The Thief of Blessing**

I am sure that you, dear reader, have had the occasion to come across a book which you simply could not put down. Something so fascinating, so gripping, that you were compelled to read it cover to cover in as short a time as you could manage.

I came across such a book—a Hebrew book, the biography of a rabbi named Dov Cohen. Rabbi Cohen passed away at the advanced age of 94. He was one of the last, if not the last, of the students of the yeshiva in Hebron that experienced the horrible massacre there in the summer of 1929.

The book is entitled *Vayelchu Shnayhem Yachdav* (And the Two of Them Walked Together). Much of Rabbi Cohen’s story is encapsulated in that title. For, you see, he was born in Seattle, WA into a family of Lithuanian Jewish immigrants. The family faced all of the challenges of Americanization in the early decades of the last century.

Rabbi Cohen’s mother witnessed the inexorable process of assimilation with which her older children were involved. She was determined that her youngest child, Dov, would receive a Jewish education as intensive as the one she witnessed back in the old country.

So, in 1926, she took her then fourteen-year-old son from Seattle eastward across the United States, across the Atlantic Ocean, through the straits of Gibraltar, and ultimately to the then totally primitive and isolated village of Hebron. She committed him there to the tutelage of the famed Rabbi Nossan Tzvi Finkel of Slobodka. Indeed, “the two of them walked together.”

I cannot possibly share with you, in the context of this column, all of the ensuing adventures in Rabbi Cohen’s life. But there is one episode that I must relate.

Dov visited the United States several times during the eighty years that followed his first days in the land of Israel. And each time he experienced a sort of “culture shock.”

Once, on a Sunday morning, he found himself in a taxi with the radio on. He soon realized that the radio was playing a sermon being delivered by a Christian minister in his church. He was unable to have the taxi driver change the radio station. And so, quite uncomfortably, he listened to the preacher’s sermon. And this is what he heard:

“The group in charge of increasing the enrollment in gehenna, or hell, was discussing ways to get more people to sin. One suggested encouraging them to steal. But the others all protested that the laws against theft were too strict and not enough people would sin by stealing. Another suggested encouraging people to lie. Again, the others protested that lying would make people feel too guilty. Finally came the suggestion with which everyone agreed:

“Let’s encourage people to do good deeds, acts of loving kindness, acts of charity, acts of courage and justice. But let’s tell them not to do those things today. But rather, tomorrow!”

Rabbi Cohen was moved to the core by that story and was inspired by it. Indeed, he shared it with Jewish audiences whenever he could. The lesson he learned and shared was one that Judaism also teaches, albeit not with that particular story. It is the lesson of the dangers of procrastination, of the importance of doing things as soon as possible and not putting them off for tomorrow.

This lesson is conveyed in the opening verse of this week’s Torah portion, Parshat Re’eh. “See, I set before you today blessing and curse.” Homiletically, the stress is upon “today,” this day and this moment. Do the right thing today and it will be a blessing. Put it off until tomorrow and the result is cursed.

We have all heard the advice, “Never put off until tomorrow what you can do today.” This advice is useful in all aspects of life, but it is especially useful in the context of religious behavior and spiritual service. Postponing until a tomorrow which may never come can be, as the Gentile preacher’s story suggests, nothing less than sinful.

You may also have heard the adage, which originates with the 18th century poet Edward Young, “Procrastination is the thief of time.” The opening words of the Torah portion suggest that procrastination is not only the thief of time but it is the thief of life and of blessing.

“See, I have given you today, this day, now and not later, to perform the good deed, and if you do it now it will be a blessing. If you procrastinate you may never do it at all, and the result may be quite different from a blessing.” This is the lesson of the opening verse of Re’eh. And how ironic it is that the subject of the engrossing biography that I just finished reading, Rabbi Dov Cohen, a yeshiva

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boy and eventually a well-known Jewish rabbi, learned this lesson from a Protestant preacher on a Sunday morning long ago!

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### **Dvar Torah**

#### **Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

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#### **A just society depends on each one of our actions...**

Do you know another name for Sefer Devarim – the Book of Deuteronomy? It is derived from a word in parashat Re’eh: “Ki ta’ase ha’tov v’hayashar b’einei Hashem Elokeicha – When you do that which is good and right in the eyes of the Lord your God”.

Rabbi Elazar in the Gemara, masechet Avoda Zara (daf hei, amud aleph), tells us that another name for Devarim is ‘Sefer Hayashar’, the book of integrity – the book of doing the right thing. And it comes from that word, ‘hayashar’ – we must do what is good and ‘yashar’ – what is right, in the eyes of Hashem.

The Torah Temimah comments on how extraordinary it is that a whole book can take its title not from the first word, but from a key word right in the middle of it. So therefore this term ‘hayashar’ must be extremely special. And the Torah Temimah says yes, it does make a lot of sense, because in the Gemara masechet Shabbat, (daf lamud aleph, amud aleph) Hillel teaches us that the essence of the whole Torah is ‘love your neighbour as you love yourself’. Don’t do unto others that which you wouldn’t want them to do to you. This is the whole Torah he says, and the rest is all commentary.

When it comes to what I would like for myself – I want to have a good life and I also want justice – I want to be treated fairly. Therefore, I should be good and fair to others. As a result therefore, carrying out ‘ha’tov v’hayashar’ is a key component of the entire Torah, and it can justifiably be included as the title of one of the books of the Torah.

Indeed it is human nature that, from the earliest age, we have a keen sense of justice. That cry of a child – ‘it’s not fair’ is familiar to every single household where there are young children because we all demand fairness in our lives.

However, there is a problem with the concept of fairness because what I might consider to be fair, might not be fair in your eyes – and that is why in the Bible, in the Book of Judges we are told there was a period in which ‘ish kol hayashar b’einav ya’aseh’ – people would do what was fair in their own eyes, and that led to the destabilisation of the nation.

Therefore the Alshich tells us that we need to consider the last few words in our verse in Parashat Re’eh – Ki ta’ase ha’tov v’hayashar b’einei Hashem Elokeicha – when you do what is good and what is fair in the eyes of the Lord your God” – Hashem instructs us, via the Torah, as to what is just and what is fair, and as



a result, we have a guide to true justice and we can dispense goodness and do what is fair for the sake of others. From the Sefer Hayashar – The book of Integrity, we can ultimately achieve goodness and fairness not just for ourselves, but for all around us.

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### OTS Dvar Torah

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#### **A Personal Vision that Changes Everything** **Aliza Goldberg, Midreshet Lindenbaum**

*Everything rests on a person's own vision. Will that person succeed in using that deep vision to discern between blessing and curse, and make the right choice?*

Parshat Re'eh is generally read on the Shabbat when we bless the upcoming month of Elul. It gives those who study it inspiration, strength of character and courage so that they can proudly experience the month of Elul, the month of repentance. The days of the month of Elul are infused with the power of connection, and this month awakens us with a call to connect to our Creator. It is an earthly awakening that brings about a spiritual one, and instills in Jews a strong desire to mend their ways and grow stronger in their worship of Hashem.

Our parsha begins with the following verse: "See, this day I set before you a blessing and a curse". Our commentators asked why the parsha begins in the singular – re'eh ("see"), and ends in the plural – lifneichem. The Rebbe of Kotzk replies that the words "set before you" refer to something given to everyone equally, but each recipient sees the gift in a different light, since each individual has his or her own way of seeing things. One answer, which may seem rather simply, is actually very profound.

I remember a story my father would tell me about a small town with many artists, cobblers, tailors, carpenters and the like. This town lacked one profession, though: watchmakers. With time, all of the watches worn by all of the townsmen started breaking down, so much so that they ultimately decided to stop using and setting their watches, since they weren't working anyway, and weren't displaying the correct time.

Several years went by. One day, a watchmaker came to visit the town. Once they heard about the new visitor, all of the townsmen took their watches and stood in line, hoping the watchmaker could repair their watches. However, the watchmaker was unable to fix any of the watches, save one: Moishleleh's watch. "What is it about Moishleleh's watch? Why can his watch be fixed?", everyone asked. The watchmaker replied: "Moishleleh is the only one who, for all these years, chose to continue setting his watch (the earthly awakening), and not give up, even though his choice was different from that of everyone around him.

The Sefat Emet was taken by how the blessing and the curse were juxtaposed, and explained

that the blessings and curses in this world are intermixed. Hashem placed them both in our world to try to evaluate the "receptacle" in each and every one of us, wondering how much we would continue "setting our watches", day after day, even if these "watches" seemed to be out of order. Everything rests on a person's own vision. Will that person succeed in using that deep vision to discern between blessing and curse, and make the right choice?

This choice allows us to turn over a new leaf, and it gives us the strength to attain a higher rung, namely, to succeed in converting the blessing into a curse, as Resh Lakish stated in the Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yoma 76: "intentional sins are turned into merits".

The next verse of the parsha reads as follows: "The blessing, if you obey the commandments of Hashem, your God, that I enjoin upon you this day..." This reflects the transition from the power of vision ("See, I have set before you...") and the power of hearing. R. Shmuel Bornsztain, the second Sochatchover rebbe, notes this, saying: "Here, according to the birth order of the tribes, the month of Iyyar refers to Shimon, and the month of Nissan refers to Reuben. Reuben's name derives from the expression ki ra'ah Hashem – "For Hashem saw". Shimon's name is derived from the expression ki shama Hashem – "For Hashem has heard". These two months are about assessing our vision and our hearing.

The Zohar states that we see things from close up, while we hear things from afar. In other words, in Nissan, the people of Israel saw Hashem with their own eyes, as we read: "the dough of our ancestors had not time to become leavened, when the Holy Supreme King of kings, blessed be He, appeared unto them..." During the month of Iyyar, all that is left to do is assess how faraway sounds of heard. It is exciting to think that the entire nation of Israel, at this very moment, was about to enter the land of Israel, "the desirable land", and that at the outset, the Holy One, Blessed Be He begins with the sense of sight: "See, this day I set before you...". This encounter with the Holy One, Blessed Be He, is vital to the people, both as individuals and as a collective, to ensure that they remember who their Father is and that they had "seen him". It is for good reason that the idea of *zecher li'tzi'at mitzrayim*, "a memory of the exodus from Egypt", is repeated so often. This was a miracle we saw with our very own eyes, and the experience was eternal.

Today in the land of Israel, however, our connection with the Creator of the universe is longer merely a product of what we saw when we left Egypt, and when we were wandering through the desert. We ascended to a higher plane in the land of Israel – the plane of hearing – a dimension that allows us to "see sounds", to adhere to Hashem on an internal level, and to deepen our connection to Him.

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This is why the verse continues with "and the blessing which you shall hear." When we left Egypt and traveled in the desert, we sufficed with the first stage, the stage of sight, but once we entered the land of Israel, the sense of hearing, which depends on us – on our willingness to listen and our ability to be open to inward communication and internal wisdom. If we succeed in all of these, we can choose to hear the blessing. "Internal hearing" leads us to observing Hashem's commandments, not mechanically, because we were commanded to do so, but out of adherence and a deep connection to Him.

The parsha ends with the pilgrimage – the pinnacle of joy in the land. It encompasses gratitude as well as a natural and spiritual connection. Rejoicing during the *shloshet regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals, is a true expression of joy. The word *yismach* is an anagram of the word *mashiach*, the Messiah, and the joy intrinsic to the three pilgrimage festivals is tied to redemption. Through these festivals, we connect our vision (remembering the exodus from Egypt) with our hearing (our adherence to Hashem), because for us, the inhabitants of the land of Israel, adherence to Hashem is natural. It stems from our gratitude for things that are good and sublime.

This is the essence of the month of Elul: "I am my beloved, and my beloved is mine." If "I am my beloved's", that is, if I am able to both see and hear, I will merit to see the voice and hear and sense the power of the blessing, and then, "my beloved is mine". We then become delicate receptacles that can become filled with blessings.

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### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

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#### **Rabbi Yakov Haber**

#### **Free Choice and Seeking Out Hashem**

Midrash Rabba (4:3) comments on the opening verses of parshas Re'eh (Devarim 11:26-28) - "See I have placed before you today blessing and curse. The blessing if you hearken to the commandments of Hashem... And the curse, if you do not hearken to the commandments of Hashem...":

א"ר חגי ולא עוד שנתתי לכם שני דרכים אלא שנכנסתי לפנים משורת הדין ואמרתי לכם ובהרת בחיים.

R. Chaggai stated: No only have I placed two paths before you (ibid.), but I have gone way beyond (lifnim mishuras hadin) and have told you, "And you shall choose life!" (ibid. (Nitzavim) 30:19).

R. Chaggai's meaning is unclear. Why was it in any way necessary for Hashem to tell us to choose life; isn't this the obvious choice? Does one need to be told not to swallow poison or not to jump off a roof? And if the world is structured in a way where the sanctified, moral lifestyle required by the Torah is not as obvious as the laws of nature, how does Hashem's telling us to choose life add anything over the original commandments themselves? Furthermore, why is Hashem's telling His

nation to choose life considered "going beyond the letter of the law"?

The commentaries on this Midrash offer different approaches to solve these apparent difficulties (see Maharzu and Eshed Hanechalim). Perhaps we can suggest another interpretation. Elsewhere,[1] we presented the approach of Rav Chaim Volozhiner (Ruach Chaim, Avos 4:2) that ultimately the human being, created b'tselem Elokim, containing a G-dly neshama, naturally would tend toward choosing the good, that which binds him to his source. It is only in order to allow for free-will that evil appears so attractive initially. However, this initial attractiveness is only superficial. The true inner dimension of the human personality wishes to choose only the good. Based on this, Rav Chaim explains the teaching of Ben Azzai (ibid.): "הי רץ למצוה קלה" - run after mitzvos and flee from sin." This statement implies that initially sins pursue us and mitzvos flee from us. Doesn't this statement contradict the concept of free choice if the choices are not equally appealing? Rather, since the inner personality only craves the good, Hashem gave a "handicap" to sins initially to make them appear as if they are pursuing us and are more alluring; the opposite is true with respect to mitzvos.

Rav Elchanan Wasserman zt"l (Kovetz Ma'amaram) presents a similar approach concerning true and false beliefs. The neshama and intellect have absolute clarity concerning fundamental emunos, but the pasuk teaches "כי השחד יעור עיני חכמים" - bribery will blind the eyes of sages" (Devarim 16:19). This bribery takes the form of physical desires which even a child becomes accustomed to from birth when he learns to crave food. This approach can be extended to the drive for self-aggrandizement as well as envy both of which cloud sound judgment. As stated by Chazal (Avos 4:21): "הקנאה, התאוה והכבוד מוציאים את האדם מן העולם". Rav Elchanan's approach, although initially applied to beliefs, can readily be extended to other sins. As Chazal tell us (Sota 3a), אין אדם חוטא אלא אם כנס בו רוח שטות" - a person does not sin unless a spirit of temporary insanity (irrational thought) overcomes him."

Based on the above, we can suggest that the deeper meaning of R. Chagga's statement is as follows. Hashem could have created a world in which the choice between good and evil was not in any way influenced by the inner personality. The total human personality could have been formed in a way where no fundamental aspect of it tended toward good or evil. However, this would lead to many more failures in the quest to achieve perfection and obey the Divine calling. In the Creator's mercy, He formed us, as mentioned above, whereby our most fundamental aspect of our existence, the neshama, strives only for good whereas evil is only alluring on the surface. Once we succeed in removing its false veneer, the reality of the absolute good of avodas Hashem

emerges as having been within us all along. As an act of "going beyond", Hashem did not fashion us in a manner truly 50/50 in terms of the balance of good and evil. The evil side is only appealing on the surface; the good reverberates within our very essence. Thus, the chances of success are much greater. This is the Divine command of "Choose life"; it echoes and resonates within the inner self.[2] Similarly, the Ba'al HaTanya expounds at length upon the ahava tiv'is, the inherent love of G-d present in every Jew, and contrasts it with the ahava sichlis, the intellectual love arrived at through intense and sometimes tortuous study. The ahava tiv'is is not readily accessible but is always there ready to be awakened by the ahava sichlis.

The sweet singer of Israel, King David, states in the Psalm recited traditionally in the upcoming month of Elul, "לך אמר לבי בקשו פני, את פניך ד' אבקש" - to you (or "from you") my heart says 'seek my Presence!'. [Indeed], your Presence I shall seek" (Tehillim 27:8). On this verse, Rashi comments, "בשכילך בשליחותך אומר, (לי) לבי בקשו כלכם ישראל את פני ואני שומע לו, את פניך ה' אבקש. לך ... במקומך בא אלי לבי לומר כן - because of you, as your agent, my heart says, 'seek my Presence - all of Israel' and I obey... in Your place [or "representing you"], my heart comes to me to say that." Although this Rashi has been interpreted in various ways, one prominent understanding corresponds to our above presentation. Our heart, our inner essence, demands of us to seek out G-d. It is not only the external Divine command heard at Sinai and echoing ever since that informs us of the true path, but it is our very essence which calls to us constantly, "Choose life!"[3]

As we approach the preparatory month of Elul and begin to hear the sound of the shofar, let us hope that we listen not only to the external call of the d'var Hashem but connect to our very essence which constantly reinforces that same message.

[1] See Y'fas Toar - Avoiding the Temptation of Sin.

[2] See Rav Schwab on Prayer on the last blessing of krias shema for other examples where the concept "the word of G-d" refers to some other means of communication other than direct Divine command.

[3] For further expansions of the themes discussed herein, see The Two Goats and The True Self and The Choice is Ours.

#### Torah.Org Dvar Torah

by Rabbi Label Lam

#### The Raging Battle for the Mind

See I put before you today blessing and curse! (Devarim 11:26) In the Mesilas Yesharim, Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato spells out the human condition like this: "The Holy One, blessed be He, has put man in a place where the factors which distance him from the blessed G-d are numerous. These are the physical lusts which if he is drawn after them, behold, he draws away and goes ever further from the true good. Thus, we see that man is truly placed in the midst of a raging battlefield. For all matters of this world, whether for the

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good or for the bad, are trials for a man. Poverty from one side versus wealth from the other. This is as Shlomo said: "Lest I be satiated, and deny You, and say, Who is G-d? or lest I be poor, and steal..." (Mishlei.30:9). Tranquility on one hand versus suffering on the other, until the battle is waged against him from the front and from the rear."

I remember reading these words years ago and wondering aloud to my study partner, "What raging battle?" Where is this battle happening? Years later I believe I can say with certainty that there is a ferocious battle under way and it's the battle for the mind.

It's no mistake that Moshe, the greatest teacher of all time, evokes the sense of sight. Before two distinct mountains he declares, "SEE- I place before you today blessing and curse." A great teacher must employ visuals. The very last words of Chumash speak of the wonders Moshe did "to the eyes of all Israel", and Rashi explains that he is deserving of a congratulations for having broken the tablets. That was a profound visual demonstration. At the very moment of the giving of the Torah, it is written, "the nation saw the sounds". So clear was the experience auditory experience that it was visual.

That may have been quasi miraculous but I have a practical idea how these two sense can be blended. Here is a simple example. Dovid HaMelech writes like this in Tehillim, "HASHEM is my shepherd... He leads me by still waters..." These are picture words. They wake up images in the mind and create emotional impressions. Pictures touch emotions, either visual pictures or envisioned pictures. The great Baalei Musar understood this point of human psychology that we don't act on what we know but rather on what we feel.

We can know intellectually that "55 saves lives" and still drive with a heavy foot that is until we are forced to slow down and we find ourselves rubbernecking like everyone else and we witness with our eyes a tree rapped around and an ambulance wheeling away the driver entirely covered in a white sheet. Then we will tend to slow down for the next ten minutes.

Therefore in the great Baatei Musar that Rabbi Yisrael Salanter set up people would sit for hours in the dark repeating a chosen phrase over and over again. The first time it may graze our intellect like skipping a stone over the surface of a lake. After many-many repetitions pictures and movies, colorful and rich images awake in the mind and the now lake is rocking and storming with emotion.

The steak has been taken out of the freezer and is now toasting on a fiery grill. Ideas and ideals are thereby made tangible, real, edible, and most importantly motivating.

The world is filled with all kinds of agendas that are competing strongly for our attention, devotion, money, or vote, as the Mesilas Yesharim writes, "The Holy One, blessed be He, has put man in a place where the factors which distance him from the blessed G-d are numerous. These are the physical lusts which if he is drawn after them, behold, he draws away and goes ever further from the true good."

Many are seeking to install their visions in our fertile and HOLY minds and to the extent that they are successful we are lost. So our mandate is to decorate our own minds with the pictures that will lead us where know we need to go. We are truly in a raging battle for the mind.

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#### **Bar Ilan University: Dvar Torah**

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#### **Din Ha'anakah and Severance Pay in Jewish Law**

**By Elishai Ben Yitzhak**

The subject of the Hebrew slave comes up in several places in Scripture. The discussion in this week's reading is devoted to another right of the slave, the right to severance pay, in Hebrew *din ha'anakah*, so called after the verse, "you shall certainly give him" (*ha'anek ta'anik lo*). The biblical law states (Deut. 15:12-15): If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free. When you set him free, do not let him go empty-handed: You shall certainly give him a severance gift out of the flock, threshing floor, and vat, with which the Lord your Gd has blessed you.

Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt and the Lord your Gd redeemed you; therefore I enjoin this commandment upon you today.

Maimonides counts this law as comprising two commandments. One is a negative injunction—"do not let him go empty-handed"—that we not set the slave free without giving him something. The other is a positive commandment—when the slave goes free, one must give him or her of what the master possesses. In some reckoning of the commandments, another negative injunction is identified here, namely, "When you do set him free, do not feel aggrieved" (v. 18).

In Maimonides' view, the pairing of the commandments as they appear in the Torah puts *din ha'anakah*, or the law of entitlement to a grant, in the category of *lav ha-nitak le-aseh*, or a negative injunction whose violation is set right by performing a positive commandment. As Maimonides put it: "Whoever sends away his servant or maid-servant empty-handed transgresses a negative commandment, as Deuteronomy 15:13 states: 'Do not let him go empty-handed.' The verse also made provision for this to be remedied with a positive commandment, as Deuteronomy 15:14 states: 'You shall certainly give him a severance gift.'"

Of course, the right to a severance gift ostensibly contradicts the view that wages are paid for the work that a worker actually performs; for this is not the case with *ha'anakah*, since the worker has already been paid his wages for his efforts. Hence, Sifre explains the idea behind the commandment, which has nothing to do with the work done by the worker. We are commanded: "Bear in mind that you were slaves in the land of Egypt, and just as I gifted you and doubled your portion, so you too shall gift him and double for him. Just as in Egypt I gave you generously, so you too shall give him generously."

The Aharonim disagree about this commandment. Rabbi Judah ben Samuel Rozanes, in his work on Maimonides, *Mishneh la-Melekh*, believes that the requirement of a severance gift is part of the bondsman's wages. Rabbi Yehoshua Falk Cohen, in *Sefer Me'irat Einayim* (SME) on the *Shulhan Arukh*, holds that a severance grant falls under the law of gifts. In contrast, Rabbi Shabtai ha-Cohen, in *Sifte Cohen* (Shakh) on the *Shulhan Arukh* believes that "*ha'anakah* comes under the laws of *tzedakah*."

This deliberation leads to another: can the master be forced to pay severance pay, if he refuses to do so? According to *Mishneh la-Melekh*, he is to be forced to uphold the commandment and give a severance grant. Rabbi Samuel Rozovsky (1913-1979, head of the *Ponevezh Yeshiva*) refines what is said in *Mishneh la-Melekh*, that coercion is applied only at the moment the master releases his slave, but if he has already released him, the master cannot be compelled to pay.

The obligation is to pay at the time that the slave is set free, and Rabbi Rozovsky stands on the point that commandment of *ha'anakah* is to be performed at the precise moment that the slave is set free, "and it clearly follows that the negative injunction is violated immediately at the moment of emancipation." As against this approach, Rabbi Pinhas ha-Levy Ish-Horowitz writes in *Sefer Ha-Mikveh*: "We have not found that the *Bet Din* is admonished to coerce the master and extract the grant from him, and the reason is apparently because the reward is stipulated alongside the command—the Lord your Gd will bless you in all you do—so the *Bet Din* is not admonished in this regard."

Regarding the validity of the commandment of *ha'anakah* and its application, *Sefer ha-Hinukh* says, "It was practiced with regard to males and females in the time of the Temple, for the laws pertaining to the Hebrew slave apply only when the Jubilee year is observed."

Now we must ask how this commandment is relevant to our times. After all, the institution of slavery in its biblical form has been abrogated. The answer is that we derive from it

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the cornerstone for granting severance pay to a worker who has been laid off.

How can a Hebrew slave be compared to a laborer in our day, and how does one get from the law of *ha'anakah* to severance pay? After all, "We have no explicit law establishing the obligation to pay severance pay." This should be answered by citing *Sefer Ha-Hinukh*, where we are instructed that despite the fact that the law of *ha'anakah* pertained in the era when the Sabbatical and Jubilee years were observed, "nevertheless even in our times a wise person should understand the implications. Whoever hires an individual who works for him a long or even a short time should pay the worker severance pay out of that with which the Lord has blessed the employer when the worker leaves his job." To understand how *Sefer Ha-Hinukh* arrives at this conclusion, we must trace the rationale that he seeks to show us at the root of the commandment of *ha'anakah*:

So that we acquire in our being lofty, refined and admirable traits, and with this excellence and refinement of our being, that we merit beneficence; for the good Lord desires to be beneficent to His people, and our pride and glory is that we deal mercifully with whomever has served us and that we give him of what is ours by way of kindness, aside from what we stipulated with him to give him as his wages; and this is a rational matter and needs no more lengthy exposition.

This conclusion was also reached by Justice Zilberg in one of the rulings handed down in the early years of the State of Israel, before the law of severance pay was enacted. He told us, "It is well known that the notion of such severance pay originates in the duty of *ha'anakah* in the Torah."

The Sephardic Chief Rabbi, Ben-Zion Meir Hai Uzziel found another source justifying severance pay. According to him, the origin of this duty lies in the verse from Proverbs, "So follow the way of the good and keep to the paths of the just" (Prov. 2:20), as he tells us: Even though there is no substantiation in the Torah, nor in the writings of the Rabbis, to back up the payment of laborers or clerical workers hired for an amount of time, nevertheless there is place for such a law and to make severance pay legally binding: "So follow the way of the good and keep to the paths of the just," for the Rabbis deduced from this verse that the employer must remunerate his workers (*Bava Metzia* 83a)...and this gives judges the authority to take money from the employer and remunerate the workers in any instance that they see the verse applies, "So follow the way of the good and keep to the paths of the just," as they see fit, having a clear awareness of the circumstances of the employer and the worker, the reason the employer laid off his workers and the reason the worker terminated his work; and according to all these circumstances it is permissible, and incumbent upon the judges to find in favor of taking money from the employer to the credit of the worker, in regard of whom the Torah

cautions, "pay him his wages on the same day."

From the texts assembled here it follows: the present-day obligation of severance pay, aside from stemming from the laws of the State and its legislation, also draws on the biblical law of *ha'anakah*—the same law by which a slave, upon finishing his term of indenture, is to be given a grant to serve him in the period of readjustment to life as a free person. The Aharonim, with their deep insight, found that the law of *ha'anakah* should rightfully be applied not only to the slave, but also in the case of the laborer.

*Translated by Rachel Rowen*

## **Yeshivat Har Etzion: Virtual Bet Midrash**

### **The Chosen Place**

**By Rav Yair Kahn**

#### **1. The Main Theme of Parashat Re'eh -**

The Rambam begins the laws of the temple as follows: "There is a positive biblical commandment to construct a house for Hashem, ready to bring sacrifices therein ... as it says 'and you shall make for me a temple.' The *mishkan* constructed by Moshe is already described in the Torah and it was temporary, as it says 'for you have as yet to arrive etc.' Upon entering the land, they set up the *mishkan* in Gilgal ... and from there they came to Shiloh, where they erected a house of stone covered with the curtains of the *mishkan*, and it had no ceiling ... When Eli died it was destroyed and they came to Nov and built a temple. When Shmuel died it was destroyed and they came to Givon and built a temple. From Givon they came to the eternal house ... Once the temple was built in Yerushalayim, all other locations became forbidden for the construction of a temple and the bringing of sacrifices. There is no eternal house but for in Yerushalayim on Mount Moriah, as it is written regarding it 'And David said this is the house of Hashem the Lord and this is the altar for burnt offerings for Yisrael.' And it says 'this is my eternal resting place'" (*Hilkhot Beit Ha-bekhora* 1:1-3).

In the Torah, there is no explicit mention of Yerushalayim as the location of the eternal location of the temple. Instead, the Torah refers to "the place that Hashem will choose". At the beginning of our *parasha*, the Torah prohibits bringing sacrifices on any altar other than the one located at the place that Hashem will choose. The end of the *parasha* discusses the three *regalim*; the festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and Sukkot when Yisrael are obligated to appear at the Temple in the place that Hashem will choose. All told, the phrase 'the place which Hashem will choose' appears in *parashat Re'eh* sixteen different times. Therefore, if we were to isolate a single theme of *parashat Re'eh*, it would no doubt be "the place that Hashem will choose," which ultimately refers to Yerushalayim.

**2. Theme and Variation** - This week's *shiur* will focus on the beginning of the *parasha* where the phrase "the place that Hashem will choose" appears four separate times. In order to better appreciate the *shiur*, it would be

worthwhile to take a *chumash* and read the first nineteen *pesukim* of chapter twelve. One will immediately notice that this chapter seems unusually repetitive. The Torah seems to repeat the obligation to bring sacrifices and other sanctified items, such as tithes (*ma'aser sheni*), to the 'the place that Hashem will choose' four separate times:

1. "You shall not do so to Hashem your God. But unto the place which your God shall choose ... there shall you come and there shall you bring your burnt-offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes ..." (*pesukim* 4-6)

2. "You shall not do all that we do here this day, every man whatever is right in his eyes ... then it shall come to pass that the place which Hashem your God shall choose ... there shall you bring all that I command you, your burnt-offerings, and your sacrifices, your tithes ..." (8-11).

3. Take heed of yourself that you not offer your burnt-offerings in any place that you see, but in the place which Hashem shall choose ... there you shall offer your burnt-offerings, and there you shall do all that I command you" (13-14).

4. You may not eat within your gates the tithe of your grain, or of your wine, or of your oil, or the firstlings of your herd or of your flock ... But you shall eat them before Hashem your God in the place which Hashem your God shall choose" (17-18).

The oral law derives various *halakhot* from this 'repetition.' However, this does not discharge us from trying to decipher this passage based on *peshuto shel mikra* (a straightforward reading of Scripture). We will suggest a solution based on the nuances differentiating the four versions found in this chapter. Special note will be placed on the variant ways of describing the non-*mikdash* option; 1-You shall not do so to Hashem, 2-Whatever is right in his eyes, 3-Any place that you see, 4-In your gates. We will try to show how each version might deal differently with the prohibition of bringing sacrifices outside the *mikdash*.

**3. Gateway to Idolatry** - The first section begins with the obligation to destroy idolatry: "You shall surely destroy all the places wherein the nations that you are to dispossess served their gods ... And you shall break down their altars, and dash their pillars into pieces, and burn their *asherim* with fire; and you shall hew down the graven images of their gods; and you shall destroy their name out of that place" (12:2-3). The Torah then continues with a prohibition: "You shall not do so to Hashem your God" (12:4). It is not clear what this prohibition is referring to. One possibility mentioned by various commentators and supported by the Talmud, is the prohibition to destroy things of *kedusha* (sanctity). You must destroy an idolatrous altar, but are forbidden from breaking an altar consecrated for the service of Hashem. You must destroy the name of idols, but are enjoined from erasing the divine name (see Rambam *Hilkhot Yesodei Ha-Torah* 6:1).

## **Likutei Divrei Torah**

However, when read together with the continuation, it seems to refer to the prohibition of sacrificing out of the *mikdash*: "You shall not do so to Hashem your God. Rather unto the place which Hashem your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put His name there, unto His divine glory shall you seek, and there shall you come; and there you shall bring your burnt-offerings ..." (12:5-6). It is here that the Torah first introduces the theme 'the place which Hashem shall choose' as the exclusive location for bringing sacrifices. The Torah seems to be saying: do not sacrifice all over. Rather, you should go to the temple and bring your sacrifices there. In other words, Yisrael are commanded to destroy objects connected with idol worship, which are found throughout the land, which indicates that it was customary for Canaanite idolaters to build private altars. However, you should not worship Hashem in such a manner. You must go to the temple that will be erected in the place that Hashem will choose and only there bring sacrifices to Hashem (see Rashi).

According to this interpretation, the command to bring sacrifices exclusively in the temple seems to be a reaction to the practices of idol worship. Even though one's intention is to bring sacrifices to Ha-kadosh Barukh Hu, he is prohibited from mimicking idolatrous customs. This is similar to the prohibition not to worship Hashem using the same methods and ceremonies as idol-worshippers (12:30-31, see Ramban), even if one's intent is pure.

Moreover, the possibility of private altars enables defining the sacrificial act in subjective terms. This uncontrolled individual worship could lead to actual idolatry. Therefore, one reason that centralized sacrifice within the context of the *mikdash* is required is to inhibit an environment that can abuse the sacrificial act.

For instance, we find numerous references to illegal private altars (*bamot*) in *Neviim*. *Sefer Melakhim* records a number of righteous kings, who managed to combat idolatry, but did not remove the *bamot* (see Kings I 15:14, 22:44, Kings II 12:4, 14:4, 15:4, 35). Chizkiyahu and Yoshiyahu are unique in successfully removing the *bamot*. The impression is that even though the idols were destroyed, the continued practice of sacrifice on private altars was not pure worship of Hashem. Consider the following verse: "However he did not remove the *bamot* and the nation had not yet prepared their heart towards the Lord of their fathers" (Chronicles II 20:33).

**4. The Limits of Individualism** - The second section begins: "You shall not do all that we do here this day, every man whatever is right in his eyes (12:8). The expression 'whatever is right in his eyes' appears in *Sefer Shoftim* to describe the chaos that existed at that period: "In those days there was no king in Yisrael, every man did whatever was right in his eyes" (17:6 and 21:25). The lack of central authority led to a state of anarchy, as each person did what he felt was best. While individual freedom must be protected, the individual must be communally responsible as

well. Therefore our sages taught: "Pray for the peace of the kingdom for if not for fear of its authority man would swallow up his fellow alive" (Avot 3:2).

There is a need to balance individual rights and communal responsibility in the spiritual arena as well. *Yahadut* has a very detailed halakhic system. This system is binding on all and creates a religiously committed community. Nevertheless, individual expression is allowed and even invited, within the halakhic context. Every person is unique and has singular spiritual experiences. Therefore, even though there is conformity of practice, religious experience, by its very nature, is a function of the individual.

It says in this week's *parasha*: "For you are a holy nation and you were chosen" (14:2). To explain the redundancy, Rashi comments: "'For you are a holy nation' – your sanctity that you received from your forefathers, and in addition 'you were chosen' ". Mori Ve-Rebbi Rav Soloveitchik ז"ל clarified; that the sanctity we received from our fathers is the communal sanctity that exists equally to all the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. However, in addition there is a personal sanctity, whereby every individual is unique. He explained that a mitzva has two aspects; the mechanical act and the spiritual intent. As far as the mechanical act is concerned, we are all equal. We are all called upon to join in the same act of mitzva and the performance of one is no different then that of his fellow. Individuality finds expression in the spiritual intent, however not in the physical performance.

Regarding animal sacrifice, private altars are permissible only until Yisrael possess Canaan and establish a central place of worship. At that point the individual must show restraint and join the community at the *mikdash*. The Torah is warning against the danger of anarchy. In the attempt to nurture the covenantal community, the individual must conform and bring his sacrifices to the communal altar. Private religious expression must be limited to the subjective realms of experience and intent.

**5. Wherever Your Heart Desires** - The third section contrasts a *korban ola* (burnt-offering) with eating meat. The Torah forbids sacrificing an *ola* in any random place. However, meat may be eaten wherever your heart desires. As opposed to the other parallel sections, the Torah here limits its comments to the *korban ola*. In most sacrifices, only part of the animal is burned on the altar, while other parts of the animal are usually eaten (by the priest and/or the owner). However, regarding a *korban ola*, the meat in its entirety is sacrificed. At the opposite end of the spectrum we have the case of one who desires to eat meat. Upon entering Eretz Yisrael, this is permitted without sacrificing any part of the animal whatsoever (see 12:20-21).

The *korban ola* is an expression of total commitment to Hashem. By bringing an *ola*, one symbolically shows that everything belongs to Hashem. In contrast, the

permissibility to eat meat, without any sacrifice, places man and his desires front and center.

In the third section, bringing an *ola* outside the *mikdash* is referred to as "any place that you see" (12:13). It is a term which is coupled with "wherever your heart desires" (12:15) mentioned in the context of eating meat. The Torah seems to be negating personal preferences regarding the *korban ola*, since they counter the entire symbolism of the sacrificial act whereby man surrenders his very self to the Almighty. At the opposite end of the spectrum, when Yisrael enter Canaan and find themselves distanced from the *mikdash*, meat may be eaten wherever your heart desires.

**6. Breaking the Routine** - The final section is not redundant insofar as it relates to eating as opposed to sacrificing on the altar. Nevertheless, I believe that the Torah is adding one final nuance in explaining the extra-*mikdash* prohibition.

"You may not eat within your gates" (12:17). In this section, the contrast to *mikdash* is 'your gates.' Instead of traveling to 'the place that Hashem will choose', one prefers to remain at home. The negative impact on the religious act is obvious. Remaining at home means maintaining a normal routine. However, the interface between man and sanctity requires elevation. The religious experience, in order to be meaningful, must be an uplifting one. The familiar must be changed and the everyday abandoned. In order to make a spiritual ascent, one is required to make the geographical ascent to Yerushalayim. This problem is even greater with respect to eating. After all, eating is a standard biological function and the danger of missing the spiritual opportunity is real. Nevertheless, even eating can be elevated to lofty heights when separated from the daily routine, traveling to the *mikdash* and dining in the presence of Hashem.

It is noteworthy that this section ends with a warning not to abandon the Levi. I believe that this warning is connected to the previous *pasuk*: "But you shall eat them before Hashem your God in the place which Hashem your God shall choose; you and your son and your daughter ... and the Levi who dwells in your gates" (12:18). Although we must leave our town and travel to the *mikdash*, the Torah instructs us to invite the *Leviim* from our town to join us as we dine in Hashem's presence. In our attempt to break the routine and search for different experiences, one might ignore the familiar faces of the *Leviim* from his home town and prefer to invite others. Therefore, the Torah tells that even though one must leave his home and travel to the *mikdash*, nevertheless he should prefer the *Leviim* from his home town. (This is similar to the preference of local paupers, which is also derived from the phrase 'your gates' 15:7, see Rashi).

**7. Summary** - Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov built altars in various different places in the Land of Canaan. However, this practice was prohibited once a central *mikdash* was erected. The Torah repeats this prohibition several times, each time changing the nuances

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of the prohibition. We suggested one possible way of analyzing the differences.

All the above, relates to the prohibition of extra-*mikdash* sacrifice. However, there is a much more compelling reason for the positive commandment to go to the *mikdash*. The *mikdash* is the place that Hashem chose as a dwelling place for His Presence, as it were. Therefore, when coming to the *mikdash*, one enters the place where he is able to experience the glory of Hashem's Presence, as it were.

**Home Weekly Parsha RE'EH**  
**Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

To Moshe, life choices are clear and self-evident. He tells the Jewish people to merely look, and they will see the difference between life and death, good and evil, eternity and time-burdened irrelevance. He implores the Jewish people to use their common sense, to pay attention to the experiences over the past 40 years in the desert, and their story. Then, they will be able to clearly see their choices in life, and what basic decisions they must make regarding what should be visible and obvious to them.

Yet, we know that even when people are aware of the consequences of their behavior, when, so to speak, they actually do see the differences and choices that lie before them, they will often choose to sin and take the wrong turn in life. People know that all addictive drugs and immoral behavior inevitably lead to personal disaster. The evidence for this is so abundant that all of us know cases and people that somehow willingly and even voluntarily choose this path of self-destruction. None of this holds people back from themselves.

The story is told about a man who was becoming an alcoholic, who was taken by his children to visit skid row where the victims of alcoholism reside on the street in their drunken stupor. One of the drunks was wallowing in the gutter amidst the filth that permeated the area. His children – those of the potential alcoholic – said to him: "Father don't you see where excessive drinking will lead you?" However, the man went over to the drunk in the gutter and whispered to him: "Where did you get such good and powerful whiskey?" We always see what we want to see. What is perfectly obvious to the sane and rational mind, is not seen by one captured by the evil instinct, affected by social pressure, and suffering from a lack of self-discipline

All parents and educators know you may lead someone to a fountain of fresh water, but you cannot make that person drink from it, unless the person wishes to do so. It is hard to convince people to see what they do not want to see, and to believe what they do not wish to believe. All the exhortations of the prophets of Israel were of little avail in the times of the first Temple, simply because the people refused to see the obvious consequences of idol worship, and the abandonment of Torah and its teachings.

The only hope for parents and educators is to improve the eyesight, so to speak, of their children and students, so that those individuals themselves will be able to perceive the clear difference between life and death, right and wrong. This is a slow and painful process, but with persistence it can be successful and lifesaving. Good eyesight requires tenacity of focus as well as excellent peripheral vision. Jewish tradition and Torah values within both the family and society help provide the good vision which enables productive choices, that will lead to eternal life and goodness.

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Berel Wein

**In My Opinion COMMON SENSE**  
**Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog**

One of the problems of the concept of common sense is that it is really an oxymoron. Sense is anything but common in human affairs and amongst human beings. King Solomon, in the book of Proverbs, devotes much of its contents explaining that fools in this world far outnumber those that are wise and sensible. There are many things in life that should be self-evident to anyone that bothers to explore and analyze the issues or challenges that exists before one's own eyes.

We are truly creatures of instinct and emotion, and common sense has little to do with either of those attributes. It is obvious that many more mistaken choices and foolish ideas are adopted than wise decisions and intelligent choices. Wisdom is not necessarily a product of higher education or advanced, professional degrees. Innate human wisdom is built upon the existence of common sense, which allows one to use one's own life experiences to arrive at correct decisions. Yet, because of our natural tendency to be influenced by preconceived ideas and agendas, common sense hardly ever comes to our rescue.

We have discarded it in favor of imaginary notions and wishful thinking. The prophets of Israel long warned of the consequences of abandoning common sense in favor of following currently popular and accepted social norms. And common

sense, once lost and abandoned, is difficult to find again and restore to its rightful place at the head of normative and productive human behavior.

At the time of the American Revolution in the 1770's, the first American best seller was published and distributed in the thousands. It was written by Thomas Paine and entitled "Common Sense." This book served as the justification for the American Revolution against the British crown, and, in a broader sense, became the parameter for early American democracy later embodied in the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. The main thrust of the book was not an emotional appeal to arms, but, rather, a cool analytical discussion of the important issues of the day that lay at the core of the dispute of the colonists with the British mother country.

The book intended to show that common sense dictates that relinquishing the American colonies and granting them independence would be in the best interests not only of the colonists, but also to the British Empire itself. But empires rarely use common sense. If they had, they would not have attempted to create empires and rulership over others in far distant lands. Common sense could have prevented the death of thousands in the long-protracted war for American Independence. Common sense could have also prevented the death of 630,000 Americans in the American Civil War 85 years later. Sadly, politicians and governments are not governed by common sense, but follow policies and ideals that may seem noble, but that almost always turn out to be of little lasting value. This leads to disruption of the society that they are supposed to improve and elevate.

Part of the wisdom contained in the idea of common sense is the dreaded law of unintended consequences. Legislation and governmental policies are often instituted to help the nation or certain groups that feel themselves to be disadvantaged and require governmental interference to create a more level playing field. So, legislation is passed, to enable and accomplish this goal of fairness for all. However, almost without exception, every one of those pieces of legislation, instead of benefiting the group for which it was intended to help, only made the situation worse by perpetuating social and economic ills that lasted for decades on end. These regulations served, instead, to exacerbate the problems that the intended laws were supposed to eliminate and heal.

Common sense always includes the warning that one's actions may have unintended and harmful consequences, which were never imagined or foreseen. We have all learned through bitter experience that no matter what country or society we live in, simply throwing money at a problem rarely, if ever, solves that problem or helps those burdened by it. We should all pray that our leaders, in all facets of life, should be blessed by heaven with common sense, so that they can be truly productive and effective.

Shabbat shalom

Berel Wein

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**The Good Society (Re'eh 5780)**

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**

Moses, having set out the prologue and preamble to the covenant and its broad guiding principles, now turns to the details, which occupy the greater part of the book of Devarim, from chapter 12 to chapter 26. But before he begins with the details, he states a proposition that is the most fundamental one in the book, and one that would be echoed endlessly by Israel's Prophets:

See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the path that I enjoin upon you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced. (Deut. 11:26-28)

If you behave well, things will go well. If you act badly, things will turn out badly. Behaving well means honouring our covenant with God, being faithful to Him, heeding His words and acting in accordance with His commands. That was the foundation of the nation. Uniquely it had God as its liberator and lawgiver, its sovereign, judge and defender. Other nations had their gods, but none had a covenant with any of them, let alone with the Creator of heaven and earth.

And yes, as we saw last week, there are times when God acts out of chessed, performing kindness to us even though we do not deserve it. But do not depend on that. There are things Israel must do in order to survive. Therefore, warned Moses, beware of any temptation to act like the nations around you, adopting their gods, worship or practices. Their way is not yours. If you behave like them, you will perish like them. To

survive, let alone thrive, stay true to your faith, history and destiny, your mission, calling and task as “a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation.”

As you act, so shall you fare. As I put it in my book *Morality*, a free society is a moral achievement. The paradoxical truth is that a society is strong when it cares for the weak, rich when it cares for the poor, and invulnerable when it takes care of the vulnerable. Historically, the only ultimate guarantor of this is a belief in Someone greater than this time and place, greater than all time and place, who guides us in the path of righteousness, seeing all we do, urging us to see the world as His work, and humans as His image, and therefore to care for both. Bein adam le-Makom and Bein adam le-chavero – the duties we have to God and those we owe our fellow humans – are inseparable. Without a belief in God we would pursue our own interests, and eventually those at the social margins, with little power and less wealth, would lose. That is not the kind of society Jews are supposed to build.

The good society does not just happen. Nor is it created by the market or the state. It is made from the moral choices of each of us. That is the basic message of Deuteronomy: will we choose the blessing or the curse? As Moses says at the end of the book:

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live. (30:15, 19)

The test of a society is not military, political, economic or demographic. It is moral and spiritual. That is what is revolutionary about the biblical message. But is it really so? Did not ancient Egypt have the concept of *ma'at*, order, balance, harmony with the universe, social stability, justice and truth? Did not the Greeks and Romans, Aristotle especially, give a central place to virtue? Did not the Stoics create an influential moral system, set out in the writings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius? What is different about the way of Torah?

Those ancient systems were essentially ways of worshipping the state, which was given cosmic significance in Pharaonic Egypt and heroic significance in Greece and Rome. In Judaism we do not serve the state; we serve God alone. The unique ethic of the covenant, whose key text is the book of Devarim, places on each of us an immense dual responsibility, both individual and collective.

I am responsible for what I do. But I am also responsible for what you do. That is one meaning of the command in Kedoshim: “You shall surely reprove your neighbour and not bear sin because of him.” As Maimonides wrote in his *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, “It is not right for any of us to say, ‘I will not sin, and if someone else sins, that is a matter between him and his God’.” This is the opposite of the Torah.”[1] In other words, it is not the state, the government, the army or the police that is the primary guardian of the law, though these may be necessary (as indicated at the beginning of next week’s parsha: “You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes”). It is each of us and all of us together. That is what makes the ethic of the covenant unique.

We see this in a phrase that is central to American politics and does not exist at all in British politics: “We, the people.” These are the opening words of the Preamble to the American constitution. Britain is not ruled by “We, the people.” It is ruled by Her Majesty the Queen whose loyal subjects we are. The difference is that Britain is not a covenant society whereas America is: its earliest key texts, the Mayflower Compact of 1620 and John Winthrop’s address on board the *Arbella* in 1630, were both covenants, built on the Deuteronomy model.[2] Covenant means we cannot delegate moral responsibility away to either the market or the state. We – each of us, separately and together – make or break society.

Stoicism is an ethic of endurance, and it has some kinship with Judaism’s wisdom literature. Aristotle’s ethic is about virtue, and much of what he has to say is of permanent value. Rambam had enormous respect for it. But embedded in his outlook was a hierarchical mindset. His portrait of the “great-souled man” is of a person of aristocratic bearing, independent wealth and high social status. Aristotle would not have understood Abraham Lincoln’s statement about a new nation, “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

The Greeks were fascinated by structures. Virtually all the terms we use today – democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny – are Greek in origin.

The message of Sefer Devarim is, yes, create structures – courts, judges, officers, priests, kings – but what really matters is how each of you behaves. Are you faithful to our collective mission in such a way that “All the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will be in awe of you” (Deut. 28:10)? A free society is made less by structures than by personal responsibility for the moral-spiritual order.

This was once fully understood by the key figures associated with the emergence (in their different ways) of the free societies of England and America. In England Locke distinguished between liberty, the freedom to do what you may, and licence, the freedom to do what you want.[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, wrote that “Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith.”[4] In his Farewell Address, George Washington wrote, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion, and morality are indispensable supports.”

Why so? What is the connection between morality and freedom? The answer was given by Edmund Burke:

“Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites... Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”[5]

In other words, the less law enforcement depends on surveillance or the police, and the more on internalised habits of law-abidingness, the freer the society. That is why Moses, and later Ezra, and later still the rabbis, put so much emphasis on learning the law so that it became natural to keep the law.

What is sad is that this entire constellation of beliefs – the biblical foundations of a free society – has been almost completely lost to the liberal democracies of the West. Today it is assumed that morality is a private affair. It has nothing to do with the fate of the nation. Even the concept of a nation has become questionable in a global age. National cultures are now multi-cultures. Elites no longer belong “somewhere”; they are at home “anywhere.”[6] A nation’s strength is now measured by the size and growth of its economy. The West has reverted to the Hellenistic idea that freedom has to do with structures – nowadays, democratically elected governments – rather than the internalised morality of “We, the people.”

I believe Moses was right when he taught us otherwise: that the great choice is between the blessing and the curse, between following the voice of God or the seductive call of instinct and desire. Freedom is sustained only when a nation becomes a moral community. And any moral community achieves a greatness far beyond its numbers, as we lift others and they lift us.

Shabbat Shalom

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### **Shabbat Shalom: Reeh (Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17)**

#### **Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

Efrat, Israel – “If there will arise in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of dreams and he gives you a sign or a convincing manifestation, and this sign or convincing manifestation which he had announced to you occurred; (And he utilized what appeared to be this miraculous occurrence) to say ‘Let us follow after other gods...,’ you must not hearken to the words of that “prophet”... After your God shall you walk, Him shall you revere, keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him and cleave unto Him...” (Deuteronomy 13:2-5).

From the earliest Biblical times, Judaism – a moral and enlightened religion based upon an ethical monotheism which taught justice, compassion and peace – was forced to struggle against idolatrous voodoo and magic. Apparently the more mysterious, uncertain and fragile life appeared to be, the greater the attraction to follow wonder – working, prophecy – speaking individuals who claimed a “local telephone” relationship to the Divine or to the various divinities in which they believed.



Fascinatingly enough, the twelfth century Commentary Ramban (Nachmanides) admits of the possibility that there do exist gifted individuals with what we would consider to be prophetic powers: “Possibly the Biblical text is hinting at a true phenomenon, that souls of several individuals have the prophetic power to know the future, and not one really knows the source of that power... an inner spirit comes to that individual saying that such and such will occur in the future to a certain object... and the matter proves to be true to those who see it happen...” (Ramban, ad loc). Nevertheless, if such a prophecy is used to turn someone away from the laws of Torah, the soothsayer is considered to be a malevolent idolater. Indeed, the entire introduction to this description of a false prophet is the Biblical insistence upon the ultimate truth of our Torah, “a Judicial code which dare not be compromised, not even by abilities to predict future events on the basis of heavenly voices: “Every word which I have commanded you, you must observe to perform; do not add to it and do not distract from it” (Deut 13:1). No one, not even the most gifted oracle, can rise above the authority and supremacy of our Torah!

Maimonides is likewise very stringent in defining all forms of idolatry. Our Bible insists that “there shall not be found among you... any soothsayer (Kosem), astrologer, enchanter or sorcerer” (Deut 18:10), and our great Spanish legalist – philosopher explains a Kosem as “one who does an act in order to free his mind from all distractions so that he can predict future events, and he says that something will occur or will not occur” (Mishneh Torah, Laws of Idolatry, 11,6). Indeed, there may be individuals with such abilities, but that does not necessarily mean that such soothsayers have proper moral judgment or give wise halakhic counsel.

From this perspective we can readily understand why our tradition insists that “the Torah is no longer in heaven,” so we do not listen to heavenly voices (B.T. Bava Metzia 59b) and “the Sage is to be preferred over the prophet” (Bava Batra 12b); our religio-legal system, albeit based upon a law which we believe to be the word of the Living God, nevertheless is interpreted and developed in each generation predicated upon logically sound principles and analytically sound explanations. Reasoned Responsa are open to scholarly debate, and no one can claim the forensic edge because he heard a voice from Heaven. Hence the continuity of our tradition remains insured, with legal interpretations based upon traditionally ordained logic no one has the ability to undermine our sacred texts by a newly revealed addendum or substitute.

I believe that there is an even more profound reason for our rejection of fortune tellers, even deeply religious fortune tellers who do not use their “gifts” to undermine our tradition. The Bible itself teaches “the secrets are for the Lord our God and that which is revealed is for us and our descendants forever to perform all the words of this Torah” (Deut. 29:28). Our task is not to second-guess God, or to use our religion or our religious leaders to make our lives easier or more certain, to remove human doubt or vulnerability. The commandments are here for us to serve God, not in order to attempt to have God serve us. Hence the Mishnah teaches that “we are to serve our Master not in order to receive a reward” (Avot 1), but because it is right to serve Him and will ultimately make for a better world – not necessarily an easier individual life. Faith is not a guarantee that my life will be comfortable and cancer – free, if I do what the Torah commands; faith rather demands faithfulness to God’s desired life-style no matter how difficult or challenging my individual life may be. As Yossele Rakover, supposed victim of the Warsaw Ghetto poignantly writes in his last Will and Testament: “You have done everything possible to make me stop believing in You and maintaining your commandments. But, my wrathful God, it will not avail You in the least. I will never stop believing you, never stop loving You. Who then shall I believe in, the cruel God (or non-god) of my enemies? Shema Yisrael, Hashem Elokenu, Hashem Ehad.”

Similar to this must be our attitude to Prayer. We believe in a Higher Being who can certainly make the miraculous occur, but who only guaranteed that the Jewish people would never be completely destroyed, and that eventually the world will accept a God of peace and moral

justice emanating from the ethics of our eternal Torah. Otherwise in large measure, the world operates according to its natural design. Yes, “even if a sword is dangling at your throat, do not despair of God’s compassion,” but – at that same time – “do not rely on miracles.” Pray for the best, but prepare for the worst.

The very practical Talmudic passage in Berachot (B.T. 32b.) teaches us that “one who prays too long and intensively will come to a pained heart,” and the Tosafot commentary interprets this to apply to an individual who expects his prayer to be answered. What is the repair for such a broken heart?, queries the Talmud. Occupy yourself in the performance of the commandments to serve God and try to improve society.

Our religious community must close its ears to future predictions of all sorts, no matter how pious the source. Ultimately we have but one Source, and He teaches us that “the secrets are for the Lord our God alone, and that which is revealed – to perform all the words of this Torah – is for us and our children”.

Shabbat Shalom!

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## Psalm 20: Grasping the Middle of the Beam

### Rav Kook Torah

“May God answer you in a day of distress; may the name of Jacob’s God fortify you” (Psalms 20:2).

Why does the psalmist indicate that, in times of trouble, one should call out in “the name of Jacob’s God”?

Why not Abraham’s God, or Isaac’s God?

The Sages explained that Jacob is mentioned because “The owner of a beam should grasp it by its thickest part” (Berachot 64a). But this statement is puzzling. What does advice on how to hold an unwieldy piece of wood have to do with Jacob and prayer in times of trouble?

The Mountain, the Field, and the House

Rav Kook wrote that each of the Avot had his own spiritual path in serving God. Abraham strived to teach the entire world about the One God. The name “Abraham” means “the father of many nations.” His service was embodied by the image of a Mountain. “On God’s Mountain, [God] will be seen.” The Mountain indicates an open, accessible place, inviting all people to approach.

The metaphor for Isaac’s service of God was a Field. “Isaac went out to meditate in the Field.” The Field also indicates an open place, without boundaries and divisions.

Jacob, on the other hand, heralded the beginning of a new stage in the world’s spiritual development. With Jacob began the establishment of the Jewish people, a nation with a Divine covenant and a holy mission. All of his children formed the twelve tribes of Israel.

This was the start of a new process, the world’s elevation through the influence of a holy nation. Jacob’s service is compared to a House: “the House of Jacob’s God” (Isaiah 2:3). Houses are defined by walls, separating those inside and those outside the structure.

Two Paths

Now we may understand what it means to call out in “the name of Jacob’s God.”

We may draw close to God in two ways. The first path is to approach God through the universal ideals that connect every human soul to its Maker. We may call this path as calling in the “name of the God of Abraham and Isaac.” This is a universal path by which all peoples relate to God. It is the Mountain and the Field, the spiritual paths of Abraham and Isaac, accessible to all.

The second path is to call “in the name of Jacob’s God.” This means to base our relationship to God on His special covenant with the Jewish people.

So which path should we take?

The psalmist teaches that during troubled times, we should follow the second path and focus on Israel’s special connection to God. At times of peril and need, it is best to deepen our closeness to God with those aspects that are close to the heart. This approach will inspire an outpouring of the soul and an awareness that we are praying to One Who comes to the aid of those who call out to Him.



By concentrating on this special connection to God - a connection fortified by mitzvot binding us to God's service - our heart is filled with powerful feelings of love and awe. We are filled with deep emotion for the God of Israel, Who drew us near to serve Him and gave us His Torah.

The universal connection of every human soul to God is a real connection, but it is of a more abstract nature. It lacks the warmth needed to kindle the emotions and gain closeness to God - a sense of connection that is essential in times of trouble. Unlike the more dispassionate intellect, awakening our feelings of love and awe will have a stronger impact on our actions, as our emotions are closer to our physical side.

#### Gripping the Middle of the Beam

Now we may understand the Talmudic metaphor of grasping a wooden beam at its thickest point. A piece of timber has various parts: small branches and twigs at one end, roots at the other. It is easiest to carry a beam by grabbing it at its thickest spot.

So, too, we may relate to God with an abstract, universal approach, as the Creator, as the God of Abraham and Isaac. But the psalmist counsels that we should grasp, not the upper branches, but the massive trunk. We should hold on to that which is closest to us, that which most directly appeals to our heart and soul. This is "the name of Jacob's God" - our connection to God as members of the Jewish people, recipients of His Torah.

This advice is especially relevant during times of trouble, whether personal or communal. At such times, we should gather under the flag of the Jewish people, renew our dedication to Torah, and awaken the holy emotions and thoughts that are unique to Israel. With this effort, the national soul of Israel gains strength and power, thus advancing the universal goal of uplifting the entire world.

When the Jewish people will attain a proper material and spiritual state, the time will arrive for Abraham's blessing. "All of the families on earth will be blessed through you" (Gen. 12:3). But in times of trouble, it is best to focus on our own spiritual heritage. This is a time to firmly grasp the thickest part of the tree, our ties to the God of Jacob. Then we will have a better grip on the branches above - our universal aspirations - as well as the roots below - mitzvot grounded in the physical realm.

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#### Parshas Re'eh Av 5780

##### Based on the Torah of Rav Yochanan Zweig

*This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of  
Chaim ben Yisroel z"l, Carlos Nash. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"*

#### SEEING IS BELIEVING

See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse (11:26).

This week's parsha opens with Moshe enjoining Bnei Yisroel to follow the proper path of Torah and mitzvot, and not to stray from it: "The blessing - that you listen to the commandments of Hashem, your God, that I command you today. And the curse - if you do not listen to the commandments of Hashem, your God, and you stray from the path that I commanded you today, to follow the gods of others that you did not know" (11:27-28).

Many commentators point out the incongruity in the pesukim: By the blessing it says, "that you will listen to the commandments of Hashem," and yet by the curses it says, "if you do not listen to Hashem." In other words, it should have either said "if you will listen" and "if you will not listen" by both, or "that you will listen" and "that you will not listen" by both. Why does the Torah choose the words "that you will listen" by the blessing and "if you do not listen" by the curse?

The Ohr Hachaim points out that the parsha also begins in a very unusual manner: "See, I present before you today..." Why should the Torah use the word "see"? After all, there wasn't anything to actually look at; it is merely an expression to try and get the people to focus on a concept. Yet, in general, the Torah uses the word "listen" or "hear" in such circumstances; why does the Torah wander from the usual terminology?

The Gemara (Tamid 32a) asks, "who is a wise man? One who sees what is already born." Generally, this is understood to mean that a wise person sees what the future will bring; he can discern a situation and its

consequences. However, if we read the passage more carefully, it tells us a great deal more. A wise person doesn't merely see what will happen, he actually sees the future that is born right now. In other words, it doesn't mean that the chacham can predict what will be, he actually sees it happening right now. A good example of this would be the difference between Neville Chamberlain and Winston Churchill. Churchill raised the alarm in the mid 1930's as to the dangers of Nazi Germany; well before Chamberlain made his disastrous attempt to appease Hitler, Yemach Shemo. Churchill recognized many years prior, that Nazi Germany was an evil threat.

Moshe Rabbeinu is telling us that listening to Hashem and following His mitzvot are the very bracha that Hashem is promising. The connection to Hashem is a bracha within itself; the bracha isn't a conditional consequence of doing mitzvot. That is why the possuk says, "The blessing - that you will listen to the commandments of Hashem, your God." On the other hand, if one, God forbid, strays from this path, it could lead to a consequence of a curse. This means that not following the path isn't a curse, it just isn't a blessing, and yes, it might actually lead to a curse if one falls off the path completely and starts worshipping idols. That is why the Torah says by the curse "if you do not listen to Hashem." But, in contrast, following the mitzvot of Hashem in and of itself is an immediate blessing.

That is why the parsha begins with the word "see." Following the path of Hashem is a blessing that you can see right now, not a consequence to be realized at a later date.

#### PENNYLESS FROM HEAVEN

For destitute people will not cease to exist within the land; because of this I command you saying 'you shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your poor one, and to the destitute in your land' (15:11).

The Torah makes a rather remarkably ominous statement that there will always be poor people in our land. In fact, we aren't really even discussing merely poor people; the word the Torah uses here is "evyon - destitute." Rashi (15:7) defines an evyon as one who is desperately longing. In other words, someone who feels incredibly deprived and is desperate. Quite possibly, this refers to someone who, at one point, had a high standard of living and now has fallen on hard times. For this reason, they are constantly longing and they feel deprived.

The Gemara (Shabbos 151b) uses this very possuk to say that even in messianic times there will always be poor people. What kind of system did Hashem create where there will always be those who are desperate? What possible reason could there be for an infrastructure of poverty in our society?

The prophet Yechezkel, when castigating the Jewish people for straying off the path of Hashem, compares Bnei Yisroel to their "sister" Sodom. What was the sin of Sodom that was so evil? The Navi (Yechezkel 16:49) explains; "This was the sin of your sister Sodom, that she had pride and a surplus of bread and tranquility yet she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and destitute." This seems to imply that the reason Sodom deserved to be destroyed was because the people didn't take care of their poor and desperate inhabitants. This is difficult to comprehend; nowhere in the seven Noachide laws is there a commandment to give charity. How is it possible that they deserved to be totally annihilated for this?

We know that Avraham Avinu was the first person to recognize that Hashem, the Creator of everything, deserved to be recognized in this lower world. Avraham Avinu, therefore, made it his mission to bring Hashem into the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of this world. This, of course, became the de facto mission of his children, the Jewish people, as well. At the same time, Avraham Avinu was also known as the paragon of chessed; how are these two concepts related?

Avraham Avinu recognized that Hashem's creation of the world was the ultimate act of kindness - chessed. The creation of the world was the vehicle for Hashem to bestow the ultimate good on mankind. Therefore, the very act of creation was for chessed. Avraham recognized that the real way to bring Hashem into this world is to emulate him and do acts of kindness as well. Thus, doing acts of charity is the ultimate way of connecting to Hashem because we are acting in a God-like manner. It is,

therefore, not surprising that the only way one is permitted to test Hashem is by giving charity. In this week's parsha, we actually have a guarantee that if we tithe our earnings we will become wealthy and thus enabled to give even more. This is the perfect expression of the very purpose of creation.

When the people of Sodom refused to help those who were desperate and needy, even though they had the resources to perform charity, they were in essence rejecting Hashem and the entire purpose of creation. This sin goes beyond not keeping the laws of social justice; this sin is contrary to the very nature of creation. It is for this reason that they deserved to be utterly annihilated.

This brings us back to the question of why there must always be poor people in the land; it is because we must always stay connected to the purpose of creation and have this opportunity to emulate Hashem. Just as Hashem empowered mankind through kindness, we must help and empower those who cannot do for themselves. In this way, we become God-like and bring Hashem into our world.

Did You Know...

In this week's parsha we are instructed to carefully observe all of the commandments of Hashem, and do what is right in His eyes, so that we - and our descendants - will be bestowed a good life (12:28). Chazal have long pointed out that only when one studies the Torah properly, can one accurately follow its direction (Me'em Lo'ez Re'eh 3). Therefore, it is understood that we must know the Torah in order to follow its principles. Accordingly, our Rabbis have emphasized in numerous places the importance of constant review of what we have studied. The Gemara states (Chagigah 9b) that there is even a significant difference between one who reviewed his learning 100 times and one who reviewed his learning 101 times. Interestingly, the number 101 has special significance. The Me'em Lo'ez explains (Re'eh chapter 3):

1. The angel who has dominion over the Torah and over memory is the angel Michael. The numerical value of Michael equals 101. Therefore, if one reviews his learning 101 times, Michael endows him with the ability to retain everything that he has learned.

2. Similarly, in the verse, "When Moshe charged ("tzivah") us with the teaching as the heritage of Bnei Yisroel" (Devarim 33:4) the word tzivah also has a numerical value of 101. The lesson here is that if we review the Torah 101 times, it will remain as a permanent legacy for us.

3. Another possuk (1 Chronicles 16:15), contains the same allusion to the number 101. The passage refers to the Torah as having been "commanded (tzivah) for a thousand generations." Again, the word tzivah signifies that if one reviews his learning 101 times, the reward will include keeping it for a thousand generations.

4. The numerical value of the Hebrew word zachor (remember) is 227, while the value of the word shachoch (forget) is 328. The difference between these sums is 101. Thus, the difference between reviewing your learning 100 and 101 times is the difference between remembering and forgetting it.

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**RE'EH - Deuteronomy XI, 26 - XVI, 17**

Re'eh, "look," says the Torah, I place in front of you Brachah uKelalah, "a blessing and a curse." In this way, we are made to know that the option is ours, that the result of our actions can be anticipated, and that the consequences for them are not arbitrary. If we fulfill the Mitzvot, we obtain Brachah, a blessing, and if not, we suffer Kelalah a curse. In future chapters, this warning will be repeated, and we will read in the text, "... I gave you to choose between life and death, between blessing and curse, uvacharta bachayim, and I exhorted you to choose life ...".

On a visit to the United States, the late Israeli President Zalman Shazar appeared before a meeting of the New York Board of Rabbis, where he cited the text in question. Shazar questioned the fact that the Torah

contradicts the hypothesis of behira chofshit, which is free will, by instructing uvacharta bachayim. The possibility of choice would have been better applied if our text limited itself to pointing out the anticipated consequences of our behavior and allowing everyone to choose their own path.

Shazar continued with an analysis of the great moral evils that afflict our society and concluded by pointing out that disinterest and apathy cause dehumanization, stifling any possibility of advancement and progress. Insensitivity to the suffering of others is morally indefensible and apathy is more pernicious to society sometimes than a lack of concern for the pain of others. Misunderstanding and indifference produce greater anguish than the cruel attitude of not offering a helping hand or concrete help.

The Torah is sensitive to this human failure and the cited text orders reflection on the Brachah and the Kelalah. We must meditate on what the results are when living according to Mitzvot as opposed to behavior that does not take them into account. The Torah commands us to meditate on our responsibilities and consequently we cannot assume a kind of behavior that is characterized by inertia and lack of action. The conclusion of any reflection, according to Shazar, must necessarily lead to uvacharta bachayim. Because we all want a harmonious and conflict-free society, which is impossible to achieve in an environment where theft reigns. Because we all support, in principle, the unity and firmness of the family nucleus and we know of the tragedy that irresponsible parenthood brings. Because we all feel that work is necessary, but, at the same time, we know that the spirit, the soul also requires attention. Our essential weakness is that we do not pay enough attention in analyzing our daily behavior. The desirable and advisable result of any reflection would be an orderly life, under a regime of human law and order, which should invariably lead us to uvacharta bachayim.

The Bechirah chofshit, free will, however, is fundamental to our tradition, because otherwise we could not contemplate the total structure of Sechar veonesh, the reward for good deeds, and the punishment for crimes which is part of our religious orientation. The possibility of free choice is an essential requirement to later request and demand that responsibility be assumed for the consequences of the actions.

Harav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik, a teacher of teachers, questions the response of our ancestors when they were offered the Torah, which is the Law. According to the biblical text, the response at the foot of Mount Sinai was naaseh venishma, which our tradition interprets as a manifestation of the willingness of our ancestors to obey and fulfill the precepts, even before they knew the details and content of these instructions. Indeed, the generation of that time did not exercise their Bechirah chofshit, since they did not previously make an evaluation and a weighted judgment in relation to the commitment they were making.

Soloveitchik proposes the existence of two types of will. He calls the first one Ratson Elyon, which means superior will. This expression of our will is not based on an intellectual process and does not resort to reasoning. The Ratson Elyon, responds to certain impulses of our spirituality and reveals the authentic identity of the human being. The internal debate that consists of logical evaluation of the different possibilities belongs to the world of the Ratson Tachton, which is the lower will. This is the will that we use in performing tasks and in the usual reasoning process.

It is of interest to note that the great resolutions of life are not the result of intellectual activity that meticulously examines the assets and debts, the pros and cons that our actions imply. The most consequential decisions, such as marriage and career, are generally not preceded by a careful examination of options. Faith, for example, is rather the result of an existential leap and the consequence of a strong irresistible feeling and does not signal the culmination of a process of reasoning. Our father Avraham did not arrive at his conception of the Godhead because he examined the orbit of the planets with a fine telescope or proceeded to count the stars in the sky. Contemplating the vastness of the cosmos, Avraham feels, deep within his being, the Divine presence. It is an emotional conviction and a spiritual truth that the patriarch recognizes at that time. The moment of discovery or scientific discovery occurs, on

numerous occasions, as a kind of internal light that for no apparent reason reaches the intellect, explaining the phenomenon that was previously not intelligible. (There are also those who rightly point out that only researchers and those who work hard for a long time in solving certain problems are those who, suddenly, receive that spontaneous illumination).

The hypothesis that we indicate implies certain risks or dangers since it affirms that intuitions and feelings are those that govern the most complex processes of our lives. The probability of pressing a key on a computer that can unleash a world atomic conflagration, according to our considerations, perhaps depends on this Ratson Elyon, a will that is beyond the control of our intellect. The exercise of the Ratson Elyon comes to be the result of involuntary sensations and uncontrollable impulses, apparently, not verifiable.

The Ratson Tachton probably also serves as some kind of control over the Ratson Elyon. Discovery and invention are the results of that indefinable internal light that is the Ratson Elyon. But then the Ratson Tachton comes into play to verify and confirm the theories and suggested conclusions.

The rapid acceptance of the Torah represented by the Naaseh that our ancestors expressed was followed by the Nishma which demands study and research of the consequences of the leap of faith that they initially gave. Perhaps it can be deduced from our reflection that the Naaseh, by itself is insufficient and can lead to superstition, unless it is followed by the Nishma, pondering and reflection about the received laws.

The texts of the Kabbalah suggest that only in God are the Ratson Elyon and the Ratson Tachton united in total harmony. While in man, in many opportunities, these two wills are in conflict. It depends, perhaps, on our goals in life. The Ratson Tachton is pragmatic, satisfied with mediocre achievement, and seeks immediate utility. It is limited to the visual and current perception of things. But the glory belongs to the Ratson Elyon, that responds to a vision, to causes that have noble purposes and represent eternal values.

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#### ***Ohr Somayach :: Torah Weekly :: Parshat Re'eh***

***For the week ending 15 August 2020 / 25 Av 5780***

***Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair - [www.seasonsofthemoon.com](http://www.seasonsofthemoon.com)***

#### **PARSHA INSIGHTS**

##### **In G-d We Trust**

"You shall open your hand to your brother, to your poor, and to your destitute in your Land." (15:11)

Sign seen hanging in a store: "In G-d we trust, everyone else pays cash."

A philosopher once said to Rabban Gamliel, "Your Torah commands you over and over again to give charity, and to not be afraid of its affecting your financial security. Isn't such a fear natural? How can a person give away his money without worrying that perhaps he should have saved it for a 'rainy day'?"

Rabban Gamliel asked him, "If someone asked you for a loan, would you agree?"

"Depends on who that someone is," replied the philosopher. "If it's someone I didn't know, then yes, I would be afraid of losing my money."

"What if he had guarantors?" asked Rabban Gamliel.

"Well, if I knew I could rely on them, I would agree."

"How about if the guarantor was the President, how would you feel about that?"

"Well, of course, in those circumstances I would have total confidence that I'd get my money back."

"When someone gives charity," said Rabban Gamliel, "he's actually extending a loan to the 'President' of the Universe. It says in the Book of Mishlei (Proverbs), 'One who gives graciously to the poor, extends, as it were, a loan to G-d, Who will pay back all that is due.'"

G-d pays us back in this world by making sure we get back what we loaned Him. And, in the next world, we get the full reward for our loan.

No one is as trustworthy as G-d. If He guarantees to return our money, why should anyone have the slightest hesitation about giving charity?

Source: based on the Midrash

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***Rabbi Buchwald's Weekly Torah Message - Re'eh 5780-2020***

***"Changing and Updating Jewish Law"***

***(updated and revised from parashat Re'eh 5762-2002)***

***Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald***

In this week's parasha, parashat Re'eh, we encounter a fascinating law known in rabbinic literature as שְׁמִיטַת כֶּסֶפִּים —Shmitat k'safim, the practice of forgiving debts in the seventh year of the Sabbatical cycle.

As you may know, the ancient Jewish calendar was organized on Sabbatical cycles of seven year periods. Every seventh year, the land must lay fallow, and farmers are prohibited from working the land. During this time, landowners are expected to gather enough food for their personal daily needs, while the poor and strangers may enter the unworked fields to collect their meals as well. During the שְׁמִיטָה —sh'mita year, farmers and agriculturalists are to restore their strength, and undergo "rehabilitation" through the study of Torah. By laying fallow, the land, as well, regenerates itself.

Another lesser-known statute related to the Sabbatical cycle is the practice of shmitat k'safim, in which every creditor is to forgive the debts owed to him by borrowers. Consequently, if a Jew owed another Jew money and had not paid back the debt by the conclusion of the seventh year, the creditor was expected to forgive that debt. Quite a significant sacrifice, I would say!

The law of forgiving debts is derived from a verse in Deuteronomy 15:1, which reads: מִקֵּץ שְׁבַע שָׁנִים, תַּעֲשֶׂה שְׁמִיטָה. At the end of the seven years, you shall institute a sh'mita—a "release." The Torah continues: This is the matter of the release: every creditor shall release that which he has lent to his neighbor. He shall not pressure his neighbor or his brother, for he has proclaimed a release for G-d. And that which you have of your brother, your hand shall release.

The Torah continues with a promise to the Jewish people, that if they abide by G-d's instructions, there will be no poverty among you. G-d will surely bless you in the land that the L-rd, your G-d, will give you as an inheritance to possess it. If you only will harken to the voice of the L-rd your G-d, to observe and to perform the entire commandment that G-d commanded you today.

This beautiful promise to the Jewish people concludes with these memorable words, Deuteronomy 15:6: "For the L-rd, your G-d has blessed you, as He has told you. You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow, and you shall rule over many nations and they shall not rule over you."

Forgiving debts in the seventh year is surely one of the most exalted laws in Judaism, one that underscores the extraordinary charitability practiced by the ancient Israelites. However, the Talmud reports that this generous law often backfired. Instead of helping the poor, it virtually closed the doors to the poor people. In fact, as the seventh year of the Sabbatical cycle drew near, it was almost impossible for the poor to obtain loans, since creditors knew that the Sabbatical year was at hand, and all debts would soon be uncollectable.

In order to address this situation, Hillel the Elder, the great religious leader who lived around the beginning of the Common Era, issued a proclamation called פְּרוּזְבּוּל —Pruzbul, which, through a technical loophole, renders debts transferable to the court of Jewish law. Once transferred, these debts were not owned by the individuals, but by the court of law, and were now collectable at the end of the seventh year. The justification for this action said Hillel, was שְׁלֹא תִנְעוּל דָּלֶת בְּכֶנִי לוֹרֵן, that the doors should not be closed before the poor people who wish to borrow money.

Clearly, the effect of Hillel's Pruzbul was to cancel a law of the Torah. How could that be?

Upon examining the details of the laws of shmitat k'safim, of forgiving the debts, we may see how Jewish law deftly operates, and perhaps catch a glimpse of the principles that guide the evolution and modification of Jewish law.

There is no question that in the utopian view of the Torah, at the conclusion of the seventh Sabbatical year, every Jew is expected to

cancel the debts of the poor people. Unfortunately, not every Jew is so giving or utopian. Consequently, Hillel issued the *Pruzbul*, which was based on a loophole in the text of Torah regarding the collecting of debts in the seventh year. Deuteronomy 15:3 reads: וְאִשֶּׁר יְהִי לְךָ אֶת אָחִיד, תִּשְׁמַט, תִּדָּךְ, And that which you have of your brother, your hand shall release. Our rabbis in the *Sifre*, 113, learn from this, וְלֹא הַמּוֹסֵר שְׂטָרוֹתָיו, לְדָךְ תִּשְׁמַט, לְבִידְךָ תִּתֵּן, Your hand shall release—but not one who transfers his documents to the court of Jewish law. Therefore, Hillel established the *Pruzbul* in order to “perfect the world.” In other words, the fact that the verse specifically says, “Your hand shall forgive,” implies that this particular phraseology intends to allow future generations, when necessary, to transfer debts to courts of law so they may be collected even during the seventh year. While it appears to be merely a means of avoiding a truly noble practice, this interpretation is not unlike the “elastic clause” of the U.S. Constitution, limiting individual liability by the establishment of corporate entities.

What does this all mean? Philosophically, it means that the Torah, the Written Code of the Five Books of Moses, is a “utopian document.” In utopian circumstances, every person is expected to forgive the debt of their neighbor without hesitation. Nevertheless, Jewish law recognizes that society has a long way to go before it qualifies as “utopian.” Consequently, Jews were given what is known as the Oral Code, the Talmud, which explains and develops the nuances of the written text. So while Al-mighty G-d aspires for all Jewish people to be utopian, He also provides for those who are “not yet” utopian. This loophole makes it possible for poor people to obtain loans in the seventh year, which, of course, accords with the spirit of the original law.

It’s critical to note, that were there no loophole in the letter of the law, nothing could be done to aid the poor people. However, because of the nuance in the letter of the law, Hillel was able to derive an interpretation which conformed to the spirit of the law, and worked to benefit the poor people.

A similar nuance is found in the practice of the sale of *chametz* on Passover. The Torah says (Exodus 12:19 and 13:7), that no leaven or *chametz* may be found in all your habitations. And, yet, through an exegetical loophole, we learn that *chametz* is allowed to remain in the possession of gentiles and may even be found in the Temple. While it’s true that the Torah aspires that eventually all Jews would clear away all *chametz*, the Torah realizes that until we reach that utopian state, *chametz* may be sold to a gentile or given to the Temple. Were there no such nuance in the text, absolutely nothing could be done.

The issue of driving a car on Shabbat provides a fascinating insight into the question of changing and updating Jewish law. Although Orthodox rabbis acknowledge that many people violate the laws of Shabbat by driving anyway, they could find no text or loophole to permit driving on Shabbat. In fact, they found cogent textual support for the opposite conclusion. The Torah, in Leviticus 19:30, clearly states that even building the Holy Temple in Jerusalem is forbidden on Shabbat, so how can one justify driving to a shul in Syosset on Shabbat? There simply is no textual wiggle-room whatsoever!

Why then do some laws have textual nuances and loopholes while others do not? Apparently, there are, at times, benefits to the lack of loopholes. So, for instance, as a result of the decision that driving on Shabbat was prohibited, Orthodox and Traditional Jews were forced to reside within walking distance of a synagogue, limiting them to live in more concentrated Jewish neighborhoods. It’s as if the Al-mighty, in His ultimate wisdom, realized that intensive Jewish communities are, in most instances, crucial for those who wish to maintain a viable commitment to Jewish life.

Clearly, the Al-mighty seems to know what He is doing. And, yet, despite valid legal loopholes, it is critical that we understand that Jews not become comfortable with these compromises, but instead continue to aspire to become utopian in their practices and behavior.

And so, even where there are loopholes, Jews must aspire to forgive all debts in the seventh year, to clear out all *chametz* before Passover, and to live exalted, even though not-yet, utopian lives.

*May you be blessed.*

## ***Drasha Parshas Reeh - The Meat of the Matter*** ***Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky***

*Dedicated to the speedy recovery of Mordechai ben Chaya*

In this week’s portion, the Torah allows us to partake in our material desires, but only according to Torah proscriptions. The Torah clearly allows the consumption of meat, albeit with a few caveats. The Torah states “If the place that Hashem, your God, will choose to place His Name will be far from you, you may slaughter from your cattle and your flocks that Hashem has given you, as I have commanded you, and you may eat in your cities according to your heart’s entire desire. Even as the deer and the ayal are eaten, so may you eat it, the contaminated one and the pure one may eat it together: Only be strong not to eat the blood — for the blood, it is the *nefesh* — and you shall not eat the *nefesh* with the meat” (Deuteronomy 12:21-23).

*Nefesh* has various meanings, simply stated it is the life force of the animal — perhaps what we would call “the soul of the matter.” Clearly, the consumption of blood is a despicable act in the Torah view (a fact conveniently overlooked by the centuries of libelers who had us drinking, mixing, baking and cooking with it.) In addition, the process of extricating all blood from the animal is clearly and intricately defined through the Talmud and Shulchan Aruch. However, delineating the prohibition as one of combining the consumption of the *nefesh* with the meat surely goes beyond the prohibition of eating or drinking blood.

Surely there is a deeper connotation to the prohibition of the strange concoction of *nefesh* and meat.

Rav Yehuda Laib Chasman was considered to be one of the luminaries of the mussar movement. Before he immersed himself completely in the world of Torah and mussar, he had a business that sold flour to bakers. He would devote a portion of his day to his business and the remaining time he would spend at the famed Talmud Torah of Kelm under the tutelage of Rabbi Simcha Zissel Ziv, the illustrious Alter of Kelm. One day on the way into the Yeshiva, Rav Ziv called Reb Yehuda Laib over to the side and pointed to the white powder that covered the sleeve of his jacket. Rabbi Chasman took this observation to be a clear moralistic evaluation.

“Rabbi Ziv is pointing out that the flour is becoming part of me. If it is already all over my garments, and it is still with me when I leave my store, then it has become too much a part of me.”

With that, he made a personal decision that changed his life completely. He returned home, and figured out together with his wife that the amount of their current assets would more than cover any outstanding debts and allow them to sustain themselves. They sold the business, and Rabbi Chasman enrolled full-time at the Volozhiner Yeshiva, eventually emerging the great luminary whom we all revere.

Some of us like meat: whether it is the actual beef or the proverbial materialistic affairs in which we indulge. And that’s OK to a point. After all, we are only human.

But the Torah tells us to be careful to separate the soul from the meat. The holy from the mundane. It wants us to understand that other than the quest for the prime rib, which we wish to consume, there are more noble pursuits that should consume us. Therefore, the Torah tells us to clearly delineate the difference and tells us that although we may indulge in worldly pleasure we should be careful not to allow the soul to become devoured with the meat. Thus, it clearly commands, “Do not eat the *nefesh* with the meat.” A good meal is totally permissible. It even lifts the spirit. However, materialistic indulgences as such should surely never become our obsession or sole desire. For then, it will become part of our *nefesh*. It will become tantamount to our soul desire.

*Good Shabbos*

*Dedicated in memory of R’ Yitzchak ben R’ Meir Thurm by Dr. and Mrs. Myron Thurm and family.*

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Rabbi M. Kamenetzky is the Dean of the Yeshiva of South Shore.

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***Reeh: Pilgrimage of Friends***

### **Ben-Tzion Spitz**

*The only service a friend can really render is to keep up your courage by holding up to you a mirror in which you can see a noble image of yourself.* - George Bernard Shaw

A fun and curious commandment is the requirement which is known as the Second Tithe. The Second Tithe was only practiced in the days of the Temple. It involved the entire family journeying to Jerusalem together with a tithe of their produce and livestock. Once the family reached Jerusalem the requirement was for them to eat from their bounty. That was it, have a fun meal in town, certainly one of the easier and more physically pleasurable commandments on our list.

What is curious about the commandment is that at the end of the pronouncement, its stated purpose is given as “so that you will learn to revere God.”

The Meshech Chochma on the verse in Deuteronomy 14:23 wonders as to the correlation between a festive meal in Jerusalem and reverence of God.

He explains that it's referring specifically to the Sabbath and Holidays in Jerusalem. When a pilgrim would come to Jerusalem in the times of the Temple, he would see his brothers, the Kohens, busy with divine service and involvement in Torah laws. It would inspire him likewise to dedicate himself more to divine service and study of the Torah.

During the weekdays this was less effective as everyone is busy making a livelihood, but on the Sabbath and Holidays, when we are prohibited from working, then a person has the time, the attention, and the freedom to take note of the divine service. The pilgrim is encouraged to emulate his friend and give more importance to the Torah and its precepts.

All that just from a festive meal.

May we have many occasions to partake of inspiring, celebratory feasts.

Dedication - To the memory of Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz z"tl, a true Torah giant.

*Shabbat Shalom*

*Ben-Tzion Spitz is a former Chief Rabbi of Uruguay. He is the author of three books of Biblical Fiction and over 600 articles and stories dealing with biblical themes.*

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### **Rabbi Shmuel Rabinowitz**

#### ***Parashat Re'eh: In what world are we living?***

The words 'abomination' and 'hates' appear only once in the entire Torah.

This week, we continue listening to Moses's long speech. Moses jumps from one topic to another, guiding the nation as it prepares to enter the Land of Israel. One of the salient topics in his speech is the imminent encounter with the nations of Canaan and their culture. Moses was concerned – and history proved that his concerns were justified – that the Israelites would learn from their neighboring nations to worship Canaanite idols. This concern led to a series of laws meant to create social distance between the Jewish nation and the Canaanite nations.

Even if the Jewish nation does not join in the ritual worship of Canaanite idols and continues to worship God – the one and only, the abstract and transcendental, Who has no body and of Whom no image or other symbol can be made – Moses was still concerned that the character of the Canaanite ritual worship would ultimately influence and control the kosher Jewish ritual.

“Beware, lest you inquire about their gods, saying, ‘How did these nations serve their gods? And I will do likewise.’ You shall not do so to the Lord, your God, for every abomination to the Lord which He hates, they did to their gods, for also their sons and their daughters they would burn in fire to their gods” (Deuteronomy, 12: 30-31).

The Canaanite nations' ritual worship was, among other things, particularly violent and cruel. They traditionally sacrificed children to their gods. Moses raises the concern that the Jewish nation would worship God, but might imitate Canaanite ritual and do “every abomination to the Lord that He hates.”

This is very strongly worded, using the very negatively connotated words “abomination” and “hates.” These appear only once in the entire Torah, in reference to the despicable act of sacrificing a human being.

Thank God, widespread human sacrifice no longer exists. To a large extent, this is due to Judaism's tenacious battle against it. But these verses invite us to examine the contrast the Torah is making between idol worship and Jewish worship.

What is it about idolatry that brings about such appalling cruelty? And what, in contrast, is it about Judaism that brings about morality and holiness?

The answer to these questions is hidden in the contrast between the story of creation told in the Book of Genesis and the story of creation told by idol worshipers. The Babylonians' story of creation told of a huge battle among a number of gods; the Egyptians divided creation among the many gods in the Egyptian pantheon; the Canaanites told of a family of gods that created itself and the world; the Greeks described a violent and cruel battle among the gods that was the source of all reality; the Inca tribe described a god who was afraid of other gods, so he would destroy them; and in Nordic mythology, young gods rebelled against their parents, murdered them and created the world out of their bodies.

In sharp contrast, the story of creation in Judaism is quiet and organized. One God, Who is not part of creation but is external to it, creates the entire universe using words. Perfect harmony is expressed in the summary of each of the days of creation: “And God saw that it was good.”

The world is not a battleground for gods and does not emanate from chaos. The Torah teaches that we – all human beings – live in a good, appropriate place.

Obviously, idol worship would be violent and cruel, since it is directed at gods for whom those are central characteristics. Similarly, it is obvious that Judaism would vehemently oppose such ritual worship, since Jewish worship is directed toward a good and beneficial God Who created us in His benevolence and grace into a wonderful world.

The question about our worldview is not dependent on one ritual practice or another. Man is called upon to determine, and sometimes repeatedly so, if we live in chaos or in a world of cosmic order. Does goodness emerge victorious or is violence the correct path? Can we trust others, or should we be guided by suspicion?

These are questions we are all asked to answer. If we examine and learn the stories of the Torah and its laws, we will have a better grasp of how Judaism answers these significant questions.

*The writer is rabbi of the Western Wall and Holy Sites.*

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#### ***Rabbi Daniel Stein***

#### ***The Mysterious Makom***

Surprisingly, the word "Yerushalayim" never appears anywhere in the Torah. The first time it is mentioned is in Sefer Yehoshua chapter 10. Prior to that, the Torah only speaks about an anonymous place or a mysterious makom which will be chosen by Hashem as the future site of the Beis Hamikdash, as the pasuk states, "But only to the place which Hashem shall choose from all your tribes, to set His Name there" (Devarim 12:5). The Torah is equally as vague when describing the location of the akeidas Yitzchak, where the Torah simply says, "Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar" (Breishis 22:4). Similarly, when Yaakov falls asleep on that very spot, the Torah dodges divulging any specific details and reveals only that "he arrived at the place and lodged there because the sun had set" (Breishis 28:11).

The Rambam (in Moreh Nevuchim part 3, chapter 45) suggests three reasons why the whereabouts of Yerushalayim and the Har Habayis were initially shrouded in some measure of secrecy. He writes, "First, if the nations had learnt that this place was to be the center of the highest religious truths, they would occupy it, or fight about it most perseveringly. Secondly, those who were then in possession of it might destroy and ruin the place with all their might. Thirdly, and chiefly, every one of the twelve tribes would desire to have this place in its borders and under its control. This could lead to divisions and discord, such as were caused by the desire for the priesthood. Therefore, it was commanded that the Temple should not be built before the election of a

king who would designate its location and construction, and thus remove the cause for dispute."

The notion raised by the Rambam, that the distinctiveness of the Temple Mount was deliberately concealed in order to prevent it from being seized by other religions and beliefs is supported by the preceding pasuk which commands us to "destroy all the places where the nations...worshipped their gods, upon the lofty mountains and upon the hills and under every lush tree" (Devarim 12:2). Rav Rueven Katz (Degel Reuven vol. 3 section 3) derives from the juxtaposition of these two issues that had the Temple Mount been defiled by idol worship it would have been permanently disqualified as the site for the future Beis Hamikdash. Indeed, the interceding pasuk "You shall not do so to the Lord your God" (Devarim 12:4), implies that despite the fact that the mitzvah to destroy objects of idol worship applies only to their gods and not to the mountains themselves (Avodah Zarah 45a), nonetheless, a location that was designated for idol worship may not subsequently be recommissioned to the service of Hashem.

However, Rav Yisroel Reisman proposes that the Torah concealed the exact identity of Yerushalayim and the specific location of the Har Habayis for another reason, namely, in order to enhance its mystique and allure. At the time of the Akeidas Yitzchak the Torah states, "Avraham lifted up his eyes and saw the place from afar" (Breishis 22:4). The Kli Yakar explains that Avraham was only able to appreciate the extraordinary nature of the Har Habayis from a distance, because when something is close by and easily accessible, it tends to become familiar and overlooked. Therefore, in order to properly gauge the unique qualities of the Har Habayis, Avraham had to pause along the way and look at it from afar. Similarly, at the time of the burning bush Moshe said, "Let me turn now and see this great spectacle why does the thorn bush not burn up" (Shemos 3:3). The Kli Yakar suggests, that Moshe had to take a step back and remove himself from the scene in order to grasp what he was observing.

We find a similar dynamic later on in the Parsha when the Torah tells us about the "agitator" who, "tempts you in secret...saying Let us go and worship other gods...of the gods of the peoples around you, whether near to you or far from you, from one end of the earth to the other end of the earth...you shall surely kill him" (Devarim 13:7-10). Why does the pasuk differentiate between the gods of the nations that are nearby and those that are faraway? Rashi comments, that the Torah is instructing us to conclude that just like there is nothing real about the gods that are familiar and nearby so too there is no substance in those that are faraway. However, the premise is perplexing. Why would we have thought in the first place that the gods that are remote are more legitimate or authentic than those that are close by? Moreover, why does the Torah emphasize that the conversation with the "agitator" is taking place specifically in "secret"?

The Tolna Rebbe explains that people are naturally attracted to those things and experiences that seem exotic and mysterious. Anything new or different catches their attention and arouses their curiosity. This is what drives people to visit faraway lands and sometimes pursue bizarre segulos and remedies to their problems at the expense of more classical methods and tools, such as prayer, hard work, and bitachon. This tendency is exploited by the "agitator" who recruits people by quietly whispering in their ear about new forms of idol worship that are wildly effective. Therefore, the Torah needed to stress the danger of idolatry that is enigmatic and emanates from exotic places because these forms of idol worship tend to be the most enticing.

Perhaps the specific spot of the Beis Hamikdash was deliberately obscured in order to generate greater interest and intrigue around this very special place. The cryptic descriptions of Yerushalayim remind us that much of its significance is elusive and beyond our comprehension. Unfortunately, the accessibility of Yerushalayim in recent years has undermined some of its mystique, and has led us to underestimate and overlook its sublime and singular nature. However, maybe the travel restrictions instituted this summer have served as a kind of step back from the status quo and restored some of our appreciation for this

magnificent and mysterious makom which currently many of us can only view from a distance.

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## Shema Yisrael Torah Network Peninim on the Torah - Parshas Re'eh

פרשת ראה תש"פ

ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה

**See, I present before you today, a blessing and a curse. (11:26)**

It all boils down to choices. It is either a blessing or a curse. We really cannot have it both ways. A blessing that ends up as a curse is not much of a blessing. Why is it that some of us become victim to the "poor choice syndrome"? Why can we not look at a poor choice for what it is, and just say, "No"? It is the *yetzer hora*, evil inclination, who does an excellent job of concealing the curse in our poor choices. In fact, he often presents it as a blessing, and we fall for his ruse. The *yetzer hora* is very crafty. He never presents us with a choice between good and evil, curse and blessing. It is always about two blessings. Which "blessing" should we choose? The *yetzer hora* encourages us to select the "blessing" which is really a sham, a curse dressed up in "blessing's" clothing.

It is no wonder that *Parashas Re'eh* coincides with the beginning of the *chodesh*, month, of *Elul*, when introspection of the past and change for the present – so that there is hope for the future – are the primary foci of every thinking Jew. The imperative to decide which path to choose stands before us. We must be vigilant not to allow the *yetzer hora* to misguide us. In *Yeshivas Knesses Chizkiyahu/K'far Chassidim*, during the tenure of its venerable *Mashgiach*, *Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl*, this emotion was palpable. Every *shmuess*, ethical discourse, was replete with reminders and exhortations concerning the gravity of the time, the Heavenly decision concerning each individual's future which was being determined, and what each was doing to ensure a positive outcome. A red marking was placed upon the neck of the tenth animal to enter the pen, thus marking it for the tithe. This ritual designated the tenth animal as *maaser beheimah*. Likewise, this sets the pattern for human beings, as we emotionally recite the *tefillah*, prayer, of *U'Nesaneh Tokef*, which compares humans on *Rosh Hashanah* (who pass before Hashem) to their animal counterparts who pass under their master's rod, every tenth one marked in red, to be offered as a sacrifice.

When the *Mashgiach* spoke, he tearfully implored his students to do everything in their abilities to prepare for the *Yom HaDin*, Day of Judgment, so that the red mark would not designate any one of them to be singled out as a sacrifice. He would reiterate to the students not to become one of those marked with the *pas adam*, red stripe.

It happened in the early years of the *yeshivah*, when it was still situated in Zichron Yaakov. The *bachurim*, *yeshivah* students, returned from *Tashlich* (the *Rosh Hashanah* service that is recited at a body of water, during which the worshippers symbolically throw their sins into a source of water), amid much singing, joy and dancing. Seeing this, the *Mashgiach* said that he would like to address the student body that evening.

Rav Elya commenced his discourse with the words of the *U'Nesaneh Tokef* prayer: *K'vakoras ro'eh edro, maavir tzono tachas shivto*, "Like a shepherd pasturing his flock, making sheep pass under his staff." He went on to relate his revered *Rebbe's* (*Horav Yitzchak Blazer, zl*) comments: "The shepherd begins to count his sheep as they each enter a narrow walkway, 'One, two, three, etc.' he counts, until he arrives at number ten. At that point, he places a red mark/stripe on the neck of the tenth sheep, a designation that this sheep is destined to be slaughtered (as *Maaser*). The sheep is unaware of its 'identification.' It has no idea that the red mark spells death. Thus, clueless, it dances and revels with the other sheep, heedless of its fate. 'Oy!' we cry out to the sheep. 'Why are you prancing around so joyfully, unaware of your destiny? Fool that you are; jump into the water and wash off the mark before you are led away to your death. Do what you can to save yourself!'"

The *Mashgiach* looked into the faces of his students and cried out, “Why are you dancing? What if you have the ‘mark’? Will you dance then, too? Wash it off with *teshuvah*, repentance, and *tefillah*.” They all broke into bitter weeping: the elderly, the saintly *Mashgiach*, and his young students. The windows were open, and the members of the community who were walking by heard the tumult, and they, too, began to weep. “It is within our ability to erase the red stripe. Now is the time!” This was *Rav Elya*’s motto throughout *Elul*, going into *Rosh Hashanah*, and onward to *Yom Kippur*. We must “erase the mark.”

ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה. את הברכה אשר תשמעו.

See, I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing that you listen. (11:26,27)

Noticeably, the Torah begins with *Re'eh*, see, in the singular (instead of *Re'u*) in the plural form; then, it writes *lifneichem*, before you, in the plural (not *lifanecha* in the singular form) and concludes with, *asher tishme'u*, plural that you listen (not *tishma*) singular. In his *Aderes Eliyahu*, the *Gaon*, *zl*, *m'Vilna*, explains that the *Aseres HaDibros*, Ten Commandments, are spoken to *Klal Yisrael* in the singular, because when they stood at *Har Sinai*, all of *Klal Yisrael* were standing *k'ish echad b'lev echad*, as one person with one heart. Their unity was complete. Thus, Hashem spoke to them as one unit. Likewise, here, *re'eh*, see, is spoken in the singular, because all the Jewish People stood melded together as one unit. Regarding *lifneichem*, before you (in the plural), *Klal Yisrael* is addressed in the plural, with each individual having before him his individual *bechirah*, choice. “Will I listen or will I not listen?” In this case, being part of a group can prove to be counterproductive, if the majority of the group is not prepared to listen. Thus, Hashem says: “The choice is yours individually. Even if the majority strays, do not follow. The decision is yours individually, exclusive of the sway of the majority of the people.”

*Horav Eliyahu Baruch Finkel*, *zl*, offers an alternative explanation. Veritably, the entire *parsha* should have been written in the plural, because Hashem was speaking to the entire nation. It begins in the singular – *re'eh* – to teach that herein lies a message to be conveyed to each individual or community. When the message is for the individual, it carries greater weight and, as a result, the individual takes it much more seriously. *Rav Finkel* quotes an incident that occurred concerning the *Brisker Rav*, *zl*. It was during World War II, and the bombings over Poland had begun. The *Brisker Rav* was in dire need of *hadassim*, myrtle branches, for his *lulav*. However, he did not seek just any *hadas*; he wanted those that would conform to all of the imposed stringencies that *Brisk* placed on the branch. It happened to be that *Horav Menachem Ziemba*, *zl*, was in the ghetto with the *Brisker Rav*. He asked the *Rav* if it were necessary to observe all of the stringencies during a time in which life and death were hanging in the balance. Perhaps now would be a time for the *Rav* to be *mekabel*, accept, a regular kosher *hadas*, without all of the *pitchfkes*, details. The *Brisker Rav* immediately replied, “There is no such thing as a ‘good’ time or ‘bad’ time. The *mitzvah* must be carried out in its entirety at all times. War is not an excuse to relax one’s *mitzvah* observance.”

The *Brisker Rav* added, “If Hashem would ask one thing of a Jew, to do something for Him, find a set of *hadassim*, is there any question that immediately every Jew would drop everything and search for these *hadassim*? The reason we lack the proper emotion necessary to execute a *mitzvah* properly is that we do not realize that Hashem Himself is commanding/asking us to carry out the *mitzvah*; Hashem is speaking to all Jews. This is not a selective *mitzvah*. This is not the only *mitzvah* of the Torah. This *mitzvah* has been a constant command for thousands of years. This is not the very first time that we have been commanded to do this. The Torah is teaching us that we must view every *mitzvah* that we are about to perform as a personal enjoinder which is reiterated on that very day by the Creator Himself. This can be derived from the *pasuk* in *Krias Shema*: *V'hayu ha'davarim ha'eileh*, ‘And these matters (that I command you,)’ *asher Anochi metzavcha hayom*, ‘today’ (*Devarim* 6:6). These: only this/these one *mitzvah*; I, Hashem Himself, command you, only you; today, not thousands of years ago. Therefore, each and every day, the Torah should be in our eyes as a

brand new command. Regardless of ‘last year’s’ command, today is this year. If we would sense this concerning every *mitzvah*, then, the difficult circumstances notwithstanding, we would be only too happy to carry out His will.”

I think this might be the underlying meaning of “living Torah.” Our Torah is not an archaic relic of the past, as some of the secularists would have us think. Our Torah is very much alive, with its Divine Author, Hashem, speaking to us constantly. When we open a *Chumash* and read the words, it is Hashem speaking to us – now.

כי יסיתך אחיך ... לאמר נלכה ונעבדה אלהים אחרים אשר לא ידעת אתה ואבותיך  
If your brothers... will incite you... saying, “Let us go and worship the gods of others,” that you did not know, you or your forefathers. (13:7)

*Rashi* explains the meaning of, “That you did not know, you or your forefathers”: “This matter is of great disgrace to you. For even the other nations (pagans) do not reject what their ancestors passed on to them, but this *meisis*, inciter, says to you, ‘Abandon what your ancestors passed on to you.’” Why does *Rashi* point the finger at the individual who is being incited to leave Judaism, intimating that it is humiliating to him to reject the traditions of his forebears, when, in fact, the individual who should be humiliated is the one who is acting disgracefully – the *meisis*, inciter. Why does *Rashi* focus on the victim, rather than his instigator? It is quite possible that the victim is a G-d-fearing, decent Jew, who holds dear the traditions handed down to him from previous generations. If he would be left alone, he quite possibly would continue along on his previous path of observance.

This teaches us, explains *Horav Eliyahu Boruch Finkel*, *zl*, that it is a disgrace for the victim the mere fact that the inciter considered him a good “mark”. The fact that the inciter knew his customer, that he was acutely aware of the victim’s spiritual deficiency, is reason enough to be humiliated. Why did he choose you, why not any one of the other people in your circle of friends? He probably knows something about you, some sinister secret, one that alludes to your true spiritual character – not the sham that you present in public.

Concerning the spiritual/moral character of *Rivkah Imeinu*, the Torah writes, *V'ish lo yedaah*, “Whom no man had known.” *Rivkah*’s reputation was pristine. She was so morally unblemished that no man would even entertain the notion of attempting a liaison with her. *Horav Meir Shapiro*, *zl*, underscored our Matriarch’s reputation. The flies go to the garbage. No man who had evil intent on his mind would gravitate toward *Rivkah*. They knew that she was chaste and pure. It would be a waste of time.

We can derive another lesson from the Torah’s focus on the *meisis*’ rejection of tradition. We note that with every abandonment of *Toras Moshe*, our holy Torah, we also, by extension, reject our *mesorah*, tradition, that has carefully been transmitted through the generations. Regardless of when the “family” left the fold, whether it was when their great-grandfather emigrated to America or it harks back to Europe or to Russia, at one point they were all committed Torah Jews. Someone veered to the left, and this slight deviation altered his spiritual trajectory, so that years later, his descendants were prepared to follow the road that tragically led to the baptismal font. When we break with tradition, we no longer connect to the anchor that keeps us securely grounded in place. Without the stability of the past, the present winds of change will batter us to the point that the options of a future will sadly become non-existent. This is why the slightest deviation – unless it is checked and righted immediately – can alter the course for all time.

לא תאבה לו ולא תשמע אליו ולא תחוס עינך עליו ולא תחמל ולא תכסה עליו  
You shall not accede to him and not hearken to him; your eye shall not take pity on him, you shall not be compassionate nor conceal him. (13:9)

“With prejudice” is legalese for dismissing a case/plaintiff permanently. The case is over and done with. No one is interested in rehashing it or listening to any appeals for clemency. Concerning the *meisis/meidiach*, one who entices others to go astray, the Torah goes to great lengths to underscore its disdain for anyone who would entice another Jew to worship idols. Regardless of the victim’s relationship



with the enticer, he must turn him in and see that he is brought to justice. Although the Jewish court is to manifest utmost compassion and seek every avenue to look for extenuating circumstances that would have caused the sinner to act as he did, this sin is different. Hashem does not absolve the one who hurts his fellow Jew by leading him astray. The first *meisis* in history was the *nachash ha'kadmoni*, serpent, who persuaded Chavah to eschew Hashem's command. She did not realize that she was being used; thus, she sinned. When it came time for punishment, Hashem did not look for any reason to mitigate the serpent's sin. He punished him immediately, with prejudice.

The *Alter*, *zl*, *m'Kelm* derives a powerful lesson from the immediate unmitigated punishment meted out to one who would lead another Jew astray. If this is the punishment that Hashem visits on one who entices others to sin, can we even begin to imagine the reward for one who reaches out to bring his alienated brothers and sisters in from the "cold"? This is true even if he is not successful! Trying, making the attempt, is worth it all. Even if one does not succeed, he has at least planted the seed.

The *meisis*, enticer, acts surreptitiously, concealing his malicious intentions, careful to cover his vitriol against Hashem and His People. While it is often difficult to counteract and contend with those who act under the guise of sham piety and well-meaning intentions, should we ignore those who vilify us publicly, who have no shame with regard to their true subversive intentions? We have suffered throughout the millennia at the hands of demagogues who defamed us and inflamed others against us. The Torah teaches us that we do not show any form of compassion toward those who seek to destroy us, since hatred does not warrant leniency nor mitigation. No extenuating circumstances license such behavior.

As an aside, we should not view these vilifiers as depriving us of our destiny. On the contrary, their animus towards us only increases our ultimate reward. The following Torah thought from *Horav Yehoshua, zl*, *m'Belz* (quoted by *Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita*) emphasizes this idea. The Torah writes that when Rivkah *Imeinu* was suffering pain during her pregnancy, she went to seek advice. Something was clearly not right. When she walked by the *bais ha'medrash* of Shem and Ever, Yaakov pushed hard to "leave"; and when she passed an *avodah zarah*, idol, Eisav pushed to leave. She asked, *Im kein, lamah zeh anochi?* "If so, why am I thus?"

The *Rebbe* wonders: This was not the first time one of our great women gave birth to a son who was evil. Chavah had Kayin; Noach's wife gave birth to Cham. These women carried both *tzaddik* and *rasha*. Yet, we do not find them questioning their pregnancies: "What do I need this for?" The *Rebbe* explains that their previous pregnancies had been normal. Nothing was unusual about their pregnancies. Rivkah *Imeinu*, however, was originally not destined to have a child. It was only as a result of her extraordinary prayers that she merited to have her twins – two brothers that battled one another in the womb. She did not bargain for this. This is not what she had prayed for.

Hashem replied to her, "This is not a normal twin pregnancy. These infants will become two powerful nations, and one will become stronger as a result of the other. Yes, as a result of Eisav's reign of terror and persecution against Yaakov, the Patriarch's descendants will become stronger. This is why, as early as in the womb, it was critical that they contend with one another. From day one they would have to become accustomed to their adversarial roles, and the constant battles which they would have to fight. This is the *metzius*, essence, of the Jewish Nation: struggle, contention, adversary, all of which temper our character and strengthen our resolve and commitment. Every trial, every vicissitude, makes us stronger – until that glorious day on which we will succeed in the ultimate battle and emerge triumphant.

וזה אשר לא תאכלו ... והחסידי

This is what you shall not eat...the *chasidah*. (14:12,18)

As the designated *Banim atem la'Hashem Elokeichem*, "Children to Hashem, your G-d" (ibid 14:1), we must act in accordance with our special status. It should serve as a source of pride and obligation. The Torah enjoins us with certain prohibitions which are entirely acceptable to the gentile world, but, to Hashem's children, are an anathema. Among these prohibitions are the Jewish dietary laws which prohibit us from consuming certain animals, fowl and fish. Among the fowl, the Torah lists specific fowl which are considered unkosher due to their "character" which, of course, only the Creator Who created them knows. Among these non-kosher birds is the *chasidah*, translated as the stork. While the stork/*chasidah* may be unkosher due to a character defect that it possesses, one wonders why it is called *chasidah*. The word *chasidah* is closely related to *chassid*, which means an individual who embodies piety at its apex, or one who performs acts of *chesed*, kindness. Either way, the name *chasidah* for a character-defective fowl which is unkosher seems to be an unlikely name. *Rashi* (commentary to *Vayikra* 11:19) cites the *Talmud* (*Chullin* 63a) that the *chasidah* displays kindness towards others of its own species. It is surprising that a bird that exhibits such compassion should be deemed unkosher. The *Sifrei Chassidus* (attributed to the *Rizhiner Rebbe*, or *Chidushei HaRim*) explain that directing one's kindness efforts exclusively to one's own species/fellows, while simultaneously refusing to help others, indicates that its acts of *chesed*/kindness are selfishly motivated and not very kind. The true *baal chesed* is magnanimous and reaches out to all. He is not exclusive, does not limit his *chesed* endeavors to his friends, etc. He does not distinguish between individuals based upon his personal opinions, religious preferences, definitions of good and evil in people. We are all in this together. We should, thus, allow for *chesed* to be all-encompassing and directed toward all.

While this explains the reason behind the *chasidah's* name, it does not explain why it was not called by a name that does not focus solely on its deviant acts of *chesed*. *Chesed* is a term that focuses on kindness. It is a positive term. To call a fowl of deficient character by a positive term, simply because it distorts it, seems misguided. After all, *chesed* means kindness. Deficient kindness is not kindness. I think the resolution to this question is to be found in the *Radak's* commentary to *Parashas Kedoshim* (*Vayikra* 20:17) where the Torah admonishes us concerning aberrant, immoral relationships. In addressing the prohibition against incest, the Torah says, *Chesed hu*, it is a disgrace. Here the word *chesed* is defined as disgrace. Why is this? The *Radak* explains that *chesed* has two meanings: kindness; and disgrace. The immediate question is: What is the relationship between kindness and disgrace? *Radak* explains that the disgrace of immorality is the product of over indulgence. One who is too anxious to give pleasure and is reluctant to discipline himself/herself or others is in danger of falling prey to the evil of immorality. In other words, kindness requires discipline. Without some form of due diligence one can lapse into sin.

With this idea in mind, we understand why defective kindness can be referred to as *chesed*, not the *chesed* of kindness, but instead, the *chesed* of disgrace. The *chasidah* deforms the act of *chesed* by deviating from the kindness as perceived by the Almighty – kindness to all, under all circumstances. Selective kindness falls under the rubric of disgrace.

We mentioned earlier that *chassid* also means pious, righteous. *Horav Eliyahu Chaim Meisel, zl*, adds that while *chasidah* refers to kindness, it also more importantly alludes to *chassidus*, piety. *Chassidus* means acting piously, going beyond the call of duty, beyond the letter (and, often, the spirit) of the law. The stork/*chasidah* does perform acts of kindness, but makes a big to-do out of its actions. It always feels that it is extending itself and doing more than it needs to do. The *chasidah* (or person who acts this way) thrives on accolades and attention. Heaven forbid should one benefit from the *chasidah* and not properly acknowledge its act of kindness. The *chasidah* always feels (and makes a point of allowing the beneficiary to feel) that it has extended itself. Such *chesed* is not focused on the beneficiary, but rather it is self-focused, attention-grabbing *chesed*. Since it is true that the *chasidah* could have chosen other activities to generate accolades for itself, it must be commended for selecting an area of endeavor that benefits others. The *baal chesed* who intimates by his actions that he/she derives great satisfaction in being referred to as a *baal chesed/chasidah* is still a *baal chesed* and should be acknowledged for his kind work. One must be aware, however, that since his kindness is self-centered, if the accolades stop, so will the *chesed*.

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מת פייגא גיטל בת הרב ניסן אריה הלוי ע"ה נפ' כ"ו מנחם אב תשמ"ח

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לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה

ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה



# Parshas Reeh: Sons and Brothers

By Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom

[Boldface emphasis added]

## I. OVERVIEW

As we outlined in a previous shiur in Sefer D'varim, the Sefer is made up of three distinct sections:

- \* Historical Recounting (Chapters 1-11)
  - \* Laws (Chapters 12-26)
  - \* Re-covenanting Ceremonies (Chapters 27-33)
- (Moshe's death (Chapter 34) is an epilogue to the Sefer).

Until now, we have presented this tripartite division, focusing on the content and implications of the "history-sermon" which is the content of the first three Parashiot of the Sefer. Our assumption was that, beginning with Parashat R'eh (a few verses in - since the first 7 verses are a completion of the history-sermon), we have moved cleanly and totally into the "Law Compendium" of D'varim.

We will see, during the course of this shiur, that this "clean" division is not nearly as sharp as originally presented (and as conventionally understood). Before proceeding, it is prudent to point out that the "nickname" of Sefer D'varim presents us with some difficulties. Each of the Humashim is known by at least one alternative name, found in the literature of the Talmudic/Midrashic period and in that of the Rishonim.

\* B'resheet is also called "Sefer Y'tzirah" (Book of Creation), for reasons that are somewhat obvious.

\* Sh'mot is called "Sefer haG'ulah" (see Ramban's introduction to Sefer Sh'mot for a beautiful explanation of this) or, alternatively, "Humash haSheni" (the second Humash - see Netziv's introduction to Sh'mot for an insight on this term).

\* Vayyikra is known, throughout Rabbinic literature, as Torat Kohanim (a more or less literal rendering of "Leviticus" - the laws affecting the Kohanim).

\* Bamidbar is called, as early as the Mishnah, "Homesh haP'kudim" (the Humash of the censuses).

\* D'varim is called - at least as early as Rabbinic literature - "Mishneh Torah" - (either "a repetition of the Torah" or "a second Torah"). It may be that the Torah is referring to Sefer D'varim when the king is commanded to write a Mishneh Torah (D'varim 17:18).

The conventional understanding of "Mishneh Torah" is "repetition", the notion being that Mosheh was presenting the new generation with a "recap" of the Mitzvot found in the first four Humashim. As Rav Menachem Liebttag has pointed out in one of his insightful Parashah shiurim, if the goal of Sefer D'varim is to serve as a repetition/review of the Mitzvot and/or narratives found in the first four books (as seems to be Rambam's intent in his explanation of his naming his Code "Mishneh Torah" - see his introduction there), it seems to fail its purpose - see Rav Liebttag's shiur for a full treatment of this problem.

The upshot of the problem is that there are some Mitzvot which are repeated from earlier Humashim (e.g. the list of non-Kosher animals, pilgrimage festivals), some which are not repeated here (e.g. Kohanic restrictions, offerings, Rosh haShanah and Yom haKippurim), some which are new to us in D'varim (e.g. marriage and divorce, certain components of juridical procedure) and some which are "repeated" but from a distinctly different perspective (e.g. Sh'mittah - compare Vayyikra 25:2-7 with D'varim 15:1-6). What are we to make of this Law "Review"? As a "recap", it falls short of the mark - yet it does not contain all new information. We will try to answer this by assessing the goal of Sefer D'varim in general - thereby understanding the inclusion of some of the Mitzvot here (and the sequence in which they are presented).

For purposes of this shiur, we will limit the analysis to those Mitzvot which appear in Parashat R'eh - such that this shiur will only answer part of the question.

## II. PARASHAT R'EH: THE BRIDGE FROM MITZVOT TO MISHPATIM

In earlier shiurim, we noted that the catchall word "Mitzvot", which is literally translated as "commandments", is utilized in Sefer D'varim with a unique meaning. As we can see from 6:1, 11:13 and other instances, "Mitzvot" are the general attitudinal approaches to God which comprise the telos of the covenant. Loving God, fearing Him, cleaving to Him, imitating His ways etc - these are the "Mitzvot". When Mosheh completed his "lessons" in the "history sermon" of Chapters 1-11, he had brought us well beyond the demand to observe a series of obligations and restrictions - we were asked to fear God, to walk in His ways, to cleave to Him, to love Him... (see 10:12-13). As we noted in our shiur on Parashat va'Et'hanan, this was the ultimate lesson of Mosheh Rabbenu - leading us into a constantly growing relationship with God.

Whereas the Law Compendium which begins at 12:1 has been traditionally understood as an entirely new piece of Mosheh's speech, it seems that the selection of laws (and the order of presentation) suggests a different understanding.

A quick look at the first series of laws in Chapter 12 will give us some insight:

**You shall surely destroy all of the worship-sites where the nations who you are uprooting worshipped, atop the high mountains and the hillocks and underneath every tree. You shall take apart their altars, you shall destroy their worship-pillars, their Asherot (worship-trees) you shall burn by fire and you shall break their idols - and you will erase their name from that place. You shall not act thusly with Hashem your God" (12:2-4)** The appositional phrase - you shall not act thusly may be understood several ways (see Ramban ad loc.); however, any way it is interpreted, the Torah is making a demand of us which is quite extraordinary. **We are called to behave with great passion and aggression towards the worship-sites of the pagans** - and to promote and keep opposite characteristics regarding the worship-site and Name of God. The Torah (like other religious disciplines) incorporates the full range of emotional characteristics and traits into required behavior.

Even our calendar reflects this range - from the unbridled celebration of Sukkot to the solemnity of Yom haKippurim (without mentioning the hilarity of Purim and the anguish of Tish'a b'Av - both Rabbinically mandated commemorations). We find, in most cases, that people who find Tish'a b'Av "easy" to observe have a difficult time celebrating Purim properly. There are "Simchas Torah Yidin (Jews)" and "Tish'ah b'Av Yidin" - but there aren't a lot of people who are capable of putting their full energies into the proper moods of both types of commemorations. This is because people generally have a particular disposition and those celebrations and rituals which "fit" their emotional makeup are the ones towards which they exuberantly run to participate.

The Torah here is demanding an aggressive approach to pagan sites - to uproot, destroy and erase. There are people who would find this type of behavior easy, as it fits their general emotional makeup. To ask of these same people - who found uprooting and destruction so easy - to treat God in the exact opposite manner is not such a simple task. Conversely, those who "naturally" show the utmost respect and concern for the sanctity of God's Name may find it difficult to act with vigor and determination in destroying a pagan worship-site.

The ability to act with this emotional dexterity is grounded in motivation. If someone is able to participate in the sadness of Tish'ah b'Av because he is a naturally dour person - Purim will be very difficult to celebrate. If, on the other hand, he is sad on Tish'ah b'Av because he has a tremendous love for God and for the Jewish people and is so distraught over the loss of His holy place and the destruction of His people - then he will find it just as easy to celebrate the sanctification of His Name and the salvation of His people on Purim.

In the same way, for someone to be able to uproot and destroy one place while demonstrating the necessary respect for another Place - he must be motivated by more than just natural tendencies and personal character traits. If he is motivated by an overwhelming love for God and a desire to promote God's Name in this world, he will be as zealous in his protection of God's holy place as he will in his readiness to destroy pagan places. **This first series of Mitzvot is an actualization of the ultimate lesson taught by Mosheh Rabbeinu - to love God.** Following this analysis of the first series of Mitzvot, we will then assay the rest of the Mitzvot in Parashat R'eh, viewing them as a bridge between the lessons of Mosheh and the more "legalistic" Mishpatim found in the next two and a half Parashiot (through Chapter 26).

### III. THE SECOND DISTINCTION: A CENTRAL WORSHIP-SITE

Much has been made of the relationship between the "novelty" of centralized worship in D'varim and the Sefer Torah found by Hilkiyah hoKohen (II Melakhim 22) and the subsequent reform by Yoshiah to remove all other worship sites, bringing all worship into the realm of the Beit haMikdash. The claims of the bible critics (who maintain that D'varim, or at least this section, were enacted by Yoshiyah in order to strengthen the capitol city) aside, it would be helpful to find an association between the centrality of worship (first mentioned in 12:4-14) and the preceding section.

Following our thesis that the particular restrictions and obligations presented in this first part of the Law Compendium represent expressions of the ideal relationship with God that we are to develop, we can understand the stress on centralized worship in a new light. The pagan nations of K'na'an had multiple worship-sites; although this may have been born of convenience, it certainly fit with their polytheistic approach. **Multiple "gods" can be served in multiple places.** The opening line of Mosheh's "ultimate lesson" (see our earlier shiur on Parashat va'Et'hanan) is Hashem is our God, Hashem is One. In other words, **the overwhelming and consuming love which we are to have for God (see Shir haShirim 8:7) is predicated on His singularity and uniqueness.** This unique nature of God is mirrored in the unique selection of 'Am Yisra'el (see BT B'rakhot 6a-b in the passage about "God's T'fillin"), as well as in the unique selection of one worship-site (and the uniqueness of Eretz Yisra'el - but that belongs to a different shiur). We can now understand the association between the various "relationship-Mitzvot" and the "new" (actually, newly presented) command to maintain a centralized worship locale.

### IV. INTERNALIZING A DIVINE ASTHETIC

Along with the promise of God's broadening our boundaries, such that we will not be able to bring all meat to the "place where He shall choose to place His Name"(12:20-28), the Torah expresses a concern that we will want to "adopt" pagan worship-styles for the worship of God (12:29-13:1). Following Ramban's explanation, the concern is that the B'nei Yisra'el will associate the destruction of the pagan nations with the object of their worship (they backed a losing horse) as opposed to the method of their worship. Therefore the Torah warns us not to make this mistake; indeed, "every manner of abomination which Hashem loathes did they do in worship of their gods..." (12:31). In other words, besides having a misguided approach to worship (worshipping nothingness as deities), **the methods they used (including, as the verse states explicitly, child sacrifice) were hateful to God.**

**This warning is immediately followed by the injunction against adding to - or diminishing from - God's commands.** (Note that the Christian-based division of chapters reads this command as the beginning of a new section whereas the MT [Masoretic Text] sees this as the end of the section above. While the other division is understandable, the MT break is much more reasonable; since it follows the warning to be careful in our worship of God by not introducing foreign elements into that worship.)

In other words, as S'forno explains, **we should not bring our own methods of worship - whether the result of our own creative thinking or adopting the behavior of other nations - into the worship of God.** We won't know if those behaviors will be acceptable to God within the context of worship. (There are certainly other ways to understand the role of creativity within Avodat Hashem; Rabbi Michael Rozensweig of RIETS wrote a comprehensive article on the subject in the first issue of the Torah uMada Journal.)

There is a curious assumption implicit in our distancing ourselves from that which God abhors - and which is re-addressed at the end of Chapter 13 (v. 19). There seems to be an expectation that we will internalize the aesthetics and values of God, such that we will learn to distance ourselves from that which He hates and we will know how to do that which is upright in His eyes (13:19).

This is yet another step in the development and actualization of the "v'Ahavta" ("and you shall love God") relationship: To learn what God finds acceptable and what He loathes - and then to internalize those sensitivities, such that doing that which is right (or Right) and avoiding that which is abhorrent becomes "second nature".

[note: There is much to be written on this subject; as it seems to fly directly in the face of the statement of our Rabbis: A person should ideally desire non-Kosher food, but resist it simply because of the command of God. We have treated this subject in an earlier shiur.]

This point is the tie which connects the three parashiot which make up Chapter 13 - the prophet who threatens to lead us astray (vv. 2-6); the "Meisit" who attempts to seduce people to worship foreign gods (vv. 7-12) and the "Ir haNidachat" - the city which has "gone over" to idolatry. In each of these cases, not only are we commanded to resist the respective temptation, we are also commanded to focus our approach in a way which is the opposite of the usually desired direction:

Do not listen to that prophet... (v. 4)  
(as opposed to loyalty to a prophet)

Do not have compassion... (v. 9)  
(as opposed to acting compassionately)

Utterly destroy that city... (v. 16)  
(as opposed to maintaining concern for our fellows' property)

**The Torah is again giving us direction on what should motivate our feelings - not by "natural tendencies", rather by our love for God.** Although we are generally called to compassion, loyalty, respect for elders etc., there are situations where a greater value - love for God - "overrules" the other values.

## ----- SUMMARY

The first part of our Parashah is a series of obligations and restrictions which help guide us into actualizing the love for God which is the *raison d'etre* of the Law. First, we are to demonstrate that our passions are not guided by "natural tendencies", rather by a commitment to promoting God's Name in the world. Next, we are shown how to demonstrate the singular nature of God - via centralized worship. Finally, we are given the charge to internalize the Divine system of values and aesthetics which will help us determine the Right from the Wrong.

So far, we have discussed the first half of the Parashah. Although we have not explained why Sefer D'varim is called "Mishneh Torah", we have suggested why particular Mitzvot were mentioned specifically here.

## ----- V. YOU ARE THE CHILDREN OF GOD

Chapter 14 begins with this powerful banner statement

Banim Atem l'Hashem Eloheikhem you are children unto your God.

What is the implication of this statement and its purpose specifically at this point in the Law Compendium?

If we follow the next part of the verse - that which seems to be the direct consequence of the Banim Atem avowal - we find a particular and somewhat peculiar ritual prohibition:

[At this point, it is prudent to note that we will find a number of "repetitions" of laws from earlier Humashim; however, they will, at least in some cases, be presented in a different manner than the earlier version.]

You are children of Hashem your God. You must not lacerate yourselves or shave your forelocks for the dead. For you are a people holy to Hashem your God; it is you Hashem has chosen out of all the peoples on earth to be His people, His treasured possession.

What is the connection between our being children of God and not participating in the self-mutilation mourning rituals endemic to the pagan cults of K'na'an?

Rashi answers that since we are the children of God, it is appropriate for us to look dignified and noble - something which would surely be violated by self-mutilation.

Ramban points out that if that were the reason, the violation would not be limited to mourning rituals, it would apply to any circumstance of self-mutilation. If so, why does the Torah specifically say laMet- "for the dead"?

S'forno provides an alternative to Rashi which both satisfies Ramban's challenge and is the key to understanding the rest of the Parashah:

For it is inappropriate to exhibit ultimate anxiety and sorrow over a relative who dies if there remains a more dignified relative alive; therefore, [since] you are "children of God" Who is your father and is eternal, it is never appropriate to exhibit ultimate mourning for any death. In other words, **since we are God's children and He is always with us, there is never an instance of death which we should experience as total devastation - for even when all seems lost, our Father is still there.**

**This command is immediately followed by a further explanation - For you are a holy people to God...**

If we look at the end of the next series of laws, we find the exact same phrase (v. 21) - thus bookending this section. What is the content of this section which sits between the markers of "You are a holy people to Hashem your God"?

As mentioned above, along with laws which were never mentioned before and laws which were mentioned from a different perspective, Sefer D'varim includes some instances of laws which are nearly "cut-and-paste jobs" from earlier Humashim. Chapter 14, verses 3-21, is a prime example of this type of "repetition". The list of acceptable and unacceptable animals - along with the guiding characteristics - is almost a repeat of the listing found in Chapter 11 of Vayyikra (Parashat Sh'mini). In other words, the section which is identified by the tag "You are a holy people..." is the laws of Kashrut. Why these laws specifically?

The Midrash Halakhah states:

R. Elazar b. Azariah said: From whence do we know that a man should not say: 'I cannot tolerate wearing Sha'atnez, [or] I cannot tolerate eating pork, [or] I cannot tolerate illicit relations'--Rather that he should say: 'I am capable and willing, but what can I do, my Father in Heaven decreed thus' [that I avoid these things]? Therefore Scripture states: 'I have separated you from the Nations to be Mine' --thus, he avoids the sin and accepts God's Sovereignty." (Sifra Parashat Kedoshim) RABD's reading and comments here seem to strengthen the challenge: "Therefore Scripture states: 'To be Mine'--in other words, practice this law for My sake and not due to your own consideration. (commentary of RABD, ibid.) Although we certainly do not apply this type of reasoning to those areas of Halakhah which build the ethical self - e.g. proper social interaction and respectful behavior towards others and their property - there is room for it within the corpus of Halakhah. To wit, there are some areas of Halakhah where the sole motivation for observance is commandedness. Unlike the integration and internalization of Divine values, outlined above, the laws of Kashrut (along with some other areas of Halakhah) should be driven by - and result in - a conscious and deliberate awareness of God's direct role as Lawgiver and Commander.

**If the first consequence of the banner statement: Banim Atem... is the awareness of God's constant presence in our lives, the second is the method by which we maintain that closeness - by separating ourselves and preserving a unique relationship which is "To be Mine".**

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**VI. SONS AND BROTHERS**

As surely as "You are children of Hashem your God" implies a close and special relationship with God, it also implies a special bond within that family of children. If we are all children of the One God, we are also all brothers and sisters to each other. The rest of the Halakhot presented in Parashat R'eh are expressions of that relationship - the second prong of "Banim Atem". Let's survey them:

[note: for purposes of brevity - and due to space considerations - I will highlight the phrase in each section which points to the general thread which ties these Halakhot together.]

\* Ma'aser Sheni (Second Tithe) (14:22-27)

Note v. 27: As for the Levites resident in your towns, do not neglect them, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you.

\* Ma'aser 'Ani (Tithe for the Poor) (14:28-29).

V. 29: the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that Hashem your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

\* Sh'mittah. (15:1-6).

As mentioned above, here is an example of a law which is presented in D'varim and which appears earlier - but the presentation in D'varim is from a different perspective. In Vayyikra, Sh'mittah is oriented towards agricultural "resting"; here, it is focused on "Sh'mittat K'safim", the cancellation of all debts on the seventh year. This is driven by the statement -

Of a foreigner you may exact it, but you must remit your claim on whatever any member of your community owes you. There will, however, be no one in need among you... (vv. 4-5).

\* Tzedakah (15:7-11).

Note v. 11: Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land."

\* Ha'anakah (gifting the Hebrew slave when he leaves your employ) (15:12-18)

Note v. 15, the justification for this gift: Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Hashem your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today.

\* B'khor Ba'al Mum (Sanctification of the first-born of the flock or herd and the result of its having a permanent blemish) (15:19-23).

This one does not seem to fit the group so easily; however, note verse 22: ...within your towns you may eat it, the Tamei (unclean) and the Tahor (clean) alike, as you would a gazelle or deer.

\* Pesach (16:1-8) This section is itself a bit strange, as it comes at the beginning of three parashiot, each devoted to one of the pilgrimage festivals. What is odd is that unlike the latter two, there is no explicit Mitzvah of rejoicing by which we are enjoined here. One additional "oddity"; this is the only place where the Torah refers to Matzah as Lechem 'Oni- the bread of poverty or affliction. We will return to this section at the end of the shiur.

\* Shavuot (16:9-12) Note v. 11: Rejoice before Hashem your God - you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, the Levites resident in your towns, as well as the strangers, the orphans, and the widows who are among you - at the place that Hashem your God will choose as a dwelling for his name.

\* Sukkot (16:13-17) Note (again) v. 14: Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns.

## SUMMARY

What we see throughout these last 9 parashiot of R'eh is a series of Mitzvot where the motivation - and performance - focuses on mutual responsibility for each other's welfare and inclusion. This is, indeed, the second implication of the tenet: Banim Atem l'Hashem Eloheikhem - "You are children unto Hashem your God".

## VII. POSTSCRIPT PESACH AND LECHEM 'ONI

As mentioned above, Shavu'ot and Sukkot are both highlighted by explicit commands to rejoice - and Pesach has no such command (although Halakhically there is a Mitzvah of Simchah on Pesach, it is inferred from these others by analogy).

If we consider the "Banim" relationship as it affects our interactions with other Jews, we find yet another motivation for treating each other with such consideration - especially in their realm of financial welfare and sustenance. Besides the theologically-driven argument of fellowship by virtue of a "common Father"; there is a historically-driven argument based on the common experience of slavery. Much more than common success, shared oppression serves to forge a people - as did happen for us in Egypt. It is the commemoration and

constant awareness that, although today some of us are more comfortable and financially secure than others, we all were slaves, with nothing to call our own.

This is the commemoration of Pesach - it serves as a second reason to treat each other with consideration without regard (or perhaps with excessive regard) for class distinctions. This is why the Matzah is called Lechem 'Oni specifically here - because we are to utilize the experience of Pesach to remind ourselves of common oppression - to motivate us to common concern and mutual responsibility.

Note that the section about Pesach is "bookended" by a reminder of our being slaves - once in the section of Ha'anakah (15:15) and once in Shavu'ot (16:12) - these bookends serve to highlight the place of Pesach within the larger schema of the Mitzvot appearing in the second half of R'eh. These Mitzvot are all methods of expressing and fortifying the theme: You are all children of God.

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## PARSHAT RE'AY

To our surprise, the city of Jerusalem (by that name) is never mentioned in Chumash. However, the underlying concept of that eternal city emerges as a major theme in Parshat Re'ay.

In the following shiur, we uncover the 'foundations of Jerusalem' in our study of the Torah's repeated use of the phrase: "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem" [lit. the site that God will choose], and its thematic significance.

### INTRODUCTION

When we speak of Jerusalem, we usually relate to either one of its two aspects:

- a) its geographic **location**
- b) its **function** as the national center of the Jewish Nation.

Even though Chumash never informs us in regard to its precise location, its function as a 'national center' for the Jewish Nation unfolds as a fundamental theme in Sefer Devarim.

To understand how and why, we must begin our shiur by returning to our analysis of the **CHUKIM & MISHPATIM** section of the main speech of Sefer Devarim.

Recall from our introductory shiur on Sefer Devarim that the main speech of Sefer Devarim (chaps. 5-26) discusses primarily the mitzvot that Bnei Yisrael must keep when they enter the land (see 6:1), to establish themselves as an "am kadosh". This speech divides neatly into two distinct sections:

- I - "Ha'**MITZVA**" (6:4 - 11:31)
- II - "Ha'**CHUKIM** v'ha'**MISHPATIM** (12:1 - 26:19)

The **MITZVAH** section, we explained, contains primarily mitzvot and repeated reminders ("tochaychot") regarding the proper **attitude** towards God ("ahavat Hashem") e.g. 6:5, 10:12, 11:22), while the **CHUKIM & MISHPATIM** section contains the more **practical** laws that Bnei Yisrael must keep when setting up their nation in the Land.

These 'practical laws' begin in Parshat Re'ay (see 12:1) and continue all the way until the laws of "bikurim" in Parshat Ki-tavo (see 26:1-15). As this section is the Torah's largest corpus of laws, we should expect for its manner of presentation to be significant. As we shall now discuss in greater detail, the very first primary topic of this section just so happens to be "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem". Therefore, we begin our study with an analysis of how the Torah first presents these laws:

### HA'MAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM

Let's read the opening psukim of the **CHUKIM & MISHPATIM** section, noting the progression of the commandments and the development of its main topic:

"**THESE** are the 'chukim & mishpatim' which you must observe in the **LAND WHICH HASHEM IS GIVING YOU...** :

\* You must totally destroy all the sites where the nations worshiped their idols... on the high hills and mountains... you must **ERADICATE THEIR NAMES** from this place.

\* **DO NOT WORSHIP YOUR GOD IN THIS MANNER** (in multiple places of worship/ read carefully!).

\* Rather, at the **SITE WHICH GOD WILL CHOOSE** - **HA'MAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM** - amongst all your tribes, - **LASUM ET SHMO SHAM**; -

"I'shichno ti'**DRSHU** u'ba'ta shama"

\* **THERE** you must bring all of your offerings and tithes etc. Eat and rejoice there in front of your Lord...

\* ... After you cross the Jordan and enter the Land and find rest from your enemies and enjoy security, then - **HA'MAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM L'SHAKEYN SHMO SHAM** - bring **THERE** everything I command...

\* Be careful not to offer your sacrifices anywhere that you want, rather at **HA'MAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM**, only **THERE** may you bring your offerings...  
 (see 12:1-14)

Note that the first commandment - to destroy all places of idol worship in order to eradicate the **NAMES** of other gods from your land - serves as a 'pre-requisite' for the commandments that follow: to establish a central **SITE IN WHICH GOD'S NAME WILL DWELL**.

This obligation - to transform Eretz Canaan into a land in which God's Name (i.e. reputation) becomes known - emerges as the first topic of this section. This goal is accomplished not only by ridding the land of the names of **OTHER** gods (12:2-3), but also by establishing a national religious center - i.e. **HAMAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM L'SHAKEYN SHMO SHAM** - a vehicle through which this goal can be realized.

In relation to the framework of the main speech, this opening commandment is quite appropriate, for Bnei Yisrael are about to enter and conquer the Promised Land in order to establish God's special nation. Therefore, it is significant that the opening commandment be to rid the land from the names of other gods, while establishing a site in which God's **NAME** will become known.

### A RECURRING THEME

Not only is - **HAMAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM** - repeated several times in the opening "parshia" (i.e. chapter 12), this phrase is mentioned some **TWENTY** times throughout the entire **CHUKIM & MISHPATIM** section of the main speech (chapters 12-26)! As illustrated in the following table, not only is it the **FIRST** topic of this section, it also develops as a recurring theme.

The table below summarizes each mention of the phrase "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem" together with its related topic:

<b>PEREK/pasuk</b>	<b>TOPIC</b>
=====	=====
12:5, 11, 14, 18, 21, 26	The place to bring all "korbanot"
14:23, 24, 25	The place to eat "maaser sheni"
15:20	The place to eat "bchor b'heyema"
16:2, 6, 7, 11, 15, 16	The site for "aliya l'regel" on the holidays
17:8, 10	The seat of the Supreme Court
18:6	The service of the Leviim
26:2	The place to bring one's 'first fruits'

### A NATIONAL CENTER

A quick glance at this table immediately shows that the purpose of this site is not only to offer 'korbanot'; rather it emerges as a National Religious Center. These mitzvot in Sefer Devarim facilitate the establishment of this center, for in order to fulfill them, one must frequent this site on numerous occasions during the course of the year!

First and foremost, every individual is obligated to make a pilgrimage to the site on the three agricultural holidays ("aliyah l'regel" / chapter 16). Moreover, one is obligated to visit this site whenever he must offer a "korban" (be it "n'dava" or "chovah").

The farmer must bring there not only his first fruits ("bikurim"), but also 10% of his harvest to eat and share at this site ("maaser sheni"). Likewise, the shepherd must bring not only the first born animals ("bchor"), but also 10% of his entire flock ("maaser b'heyema")! Furthermore, the Supreme Court for all judicial and halachik judgment must be located at this site.

Thus, this site - **HAMAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM** - is much more than a location to bring "korbanot". It unfolds as the National Center of the Jewish people.

What is the purpose of this center? How should it function?

One could suggest that the establishment of this site would greatly facilitate the development of Am Yisrael as God's special nation. The establishment of this center, and the obligation of every individual to frequent this site, ensures the unity of the people and of the religion. Without such a center, within several generations it would be more likely that we would find twelve different religions rather than twelve tribes.

This center was to serve as a center not only for gathering and

offering "korbanot", but also for justice, judgment, Torah education, and culture - a site that would enhance the spirituality of each individual.

To prove this point, let's take a closer look at the mitzvah of "maaser sheni":

"You shall set aside every year a tenth of the yield of your field. And you should eat this tithe in the presence of your Lord "baMakom asher yivchar Hashem l'shakeyn shmo sham"... **IN ORDER THAT YOU LEARN TO FEAR GOD** forever..." (14:22)

The Torah commands us to tithe ten percent of our produce, and eat it (or share it) within the confines of that center - an act that we are told will teach us to fear God.

But why should simply 'eating food' at this site cause one to fear God? To understand why, we must conjecture as to how this site was to develop.

### THE SITE / THE TEMPLE / AND JERUSALEM

Even though it is not explicitly stated, it is implicit that the Bet Ha'Mikdash [Temple] was to become the focal point of this national center - for the simple reason that Devarim commands us to bring our "korbanot" there. [These are obviously the same korbanot as described in Sefer Vayikra.]

However, "maaser sheni" itself is produce, and not an animal offering (i.e. it doesn't require a mizbayach). Nevertheless; the Torah demands that we eat this "maseh" at this site. This implies that there must be an additional area surrounding the Mikdash where this "maseh" can be eaten (which Halacha defines this as the area within the walls of the **CITY** that surrounds the Bet Ha'Mikdash - the same law that applies to eating the meat of the "korban shlamim".]

But when one eats his "maseh" within the walls of this city, other people will be there as well. Let's review who else should be in this special city on a daily basis. First of all, the Torah designates 'civil servants' who are to officiate and administer the Bet Ha'Mikdash - i.e. the "kohanim" and "leviim" - whose entire lives are dedicated to the service of God. There will also be the judges and scholars of the supreme court system, populating this 'holy city' surrounding the Temple, infusing it with an atmosphere of "kedusha" (sanctity).

Therefore, the experience of eating "maaser sheni" in this 'holy' city, mingling there with the kohanim, leviim, and Torah scholars, while sharing one's food together with family and the needy (see 14:25-27), would create an environment that enhances one's "yirat shamayim" - the fear of God.

Note how Chizkuni's interpretation of the pasuk re: "maseh sheni" reflects this same idea:

"...when you will go up [to this site] to eat your maseh sheni, you will see the priests officiating and the levites singing... and the Sanhedrin sitting in judgment and teaching laws..., and thus learn [from them] how to fear your God." (14:23, see also Seforno)

### A PROOF FROM HAKHEL

This obligation to frequent **HAMAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM** culminates every seven years with the "Hakhel" ceremony, where the entire nation - including the women and children - gather to hear the Torah at this very same site. Here, once again, we find "yirat Hashem" - the fear of God - as the primary purpose:

"... every seventh year... when all Israel gathers before Hashem "ba'Makom asher yivchar", you shall read this Torah (Sefer Dvarim) in the presence of all Israel. Gather ("hakhel") the people, men, women and children and the strangers, that they may hear and so learn **TO FEAR THE LORD** and to observe... Their children too ... shall hear and learn **TO FEAR GOD** as long as they live on the Land..." (see Devarim 31:10-13)

Not only do we find once again the site "hamakom asher yivchar Hashem", we also find the purpose of this gathering to instill the fear of God in those who gather. As you review the above psukim, note as well the similarities to Ma'amad Har Sinai. This beautifully supports Ramban's interpretation that the underlying purpose of the Mikdash was to perpetuate the Sinai experience (see Ramban on

Shmot 25:1 /and TSC shiur on Parshat Terumah).

To conclude our discussion of the 'function' of this site ["hamakom asher yivchar..."], we return to Torah's special use of the word "makom" in a very similar context in Sefer Breishit.

### BACK TO SEFER BREISHIT

Review the story of Yaakov's dream at the beginning of Parshat Va'yetze (i.e. Breishit 28:10-22), noting not only the word ha'makom" (five times) but also its theme. At the conclusion of this episode, Yaakov vows that upon his return to this site ["ha'makom"], he will establish a Bet Elokim - a House for God. Here, we already find a thematic connection between the word "ha'makom" and the Mikdash.

Similarly, in the story of the "akeyda" (see Breishit chapter 22) the Torah uses the word "**makom**" to describe that site. [See 22:2,3,4,9,14.] Recall as well how Avraham Avinu names this "makom" - "Hashem yireh" (see 22:14), a site that Chazal later identify as the very same mountain where the Bet Ha'Mikdash was built in Yerushalayim. In fact, in Divrei Ha'yamim we are informed that Shlomo ha'melech built the Bet ha'Mikdash on Har ha'Moriah, the site of the "akeyda" (see II D.H. 3:1-3).

Even though it is not clear where Yaakov's dream took place, the Torah's use of the word "makom" in both stories, and their common theme certainly support Chazal's conclusion that both events happened at the same site (see Rashi 28:11), which later became the Bet ha'Mikdash in Yerushalayim.

### HOLY GROUND OR HOLY PURPOSE

Our analysis thus far demonstrates how the Torah puts more emphasis on the 'function', than the location, of this site. In fact, the Torah appears to be rather evasive in regard to where this site is actually to be located (see below).

However, this very point may be very fundamental towards our understanding of Jerusalem. The site is special because of its function - to serve as a national center, to promote the reputation of God's Name ["shem Hashem"] among all mankind.

This emphasis is important, for man is very vulnerable towards focusing on the holiness of a site rather than the holiness of its purpose. [Sort of like dovening TO the "kotel" instead dovening AT the "kotel", or saying tehillim TO "kivrei tzadikim" instead of AT "kivrei tzadikim".]

For this reason, most all of the later prophets rebuke the people for misunderstanding the Temple in this manner. Take for example Yirmiyahu chapter 7 (in case you are not familiar, read 7:1-28, see also the first chapter of Yeshayahu). This rebuke does not imply that there is no value to holy sites. Precisely the opposite, the physical location is important for it provides a vehicle to promote its purpose. Yet, it always remains cardinal not to allow the holiness of the site to override the holiness of its purpose.

[For a nice perspective on the balance between these two ideas, see Tehillim 51. I realize that this is a 'touchy topic', so I'd rather you base your conclusions of David ha'Melech's explanation, rather than my own.]

### JERUSALEM / SEEK AND FIND

As we have shown, Sefer Devarim never specifies the precise geographic location of where this site is to be, i.e. where the permanent Bet Ha'Mikdash is to be constructed. Instead, the site is consistently referred to as "the one which God will choose" ("HaMakom asher yivchar Hashem").

However, in Parshat Reay we do find a very obscure hint regarding how we are to find this site: "I'shichno ti'drshu, u'bata shama" - (see 12:5)

God will only show us the site if **WE** look for it. This 'hide and seek' type relationship is reflective of every Divine encounter. To find God, man must **SEARCH** for Him. According to these psukim in Parshat Re'ay, this principle applies to the nation in same manner as it applies to the individual. [As we say in the daily Ashrei: "karov Hashem l'chol kor'av" - God is close to those who call out to Him.]

When Am Yisrael as a nation, begins a serious search for God, then God will show them the proper location to build the Mikdash.



The generation of Yehoshua, despite their military conquests, did not succeed in establishing the permanent Mikdash (after conquering the Land). Instead, they erected the temporary Mishkan in Shilo. There it remained, quite neglected, during the entire time period of the Judges. After the city of Shilo was destroyed by the Philistim (during the time of Eli / see Shmuel chapters 4-6) both the Mishkan and the "aron" wandered from site to site. It was only during the time period of David ha'melech that Bnei Yisrael actively aspired to build the Mikdash.

For example, when David became king over all of Israel (see II Shmuel 5:1-9), his first act was to conquer the city of Jerusalem. His next project was to gather the nation in order to bring the "aron" (the holy ark) to his new capital city (see II Shmuel chapter 6). Note how Divrei ha'yamim describes how David explained his plan (and the reason) to the nation:

"David said to the entire congregation of Israel: If you approve, and this is from God (the events of David's rise to power), let us go forward and invite all our brethren in the land of Israel, together with the **KOHANIM** and **LEVIIM** and gather together, **IN ORDER TO BRING BACK** to us God's **HOLY ARK** - 'ki lo **DRASH'NU'HU** b'yimei Shaul' - for during the time of Shaul **WE DID NOT SEEK IT**" (I Divrei Hayamim 13:2-3)

[Note the use of the shresh "d.r.sh." here and in Devarim 12:5]

David Ha'melech notes how the "aron" had been neglected during the generation of Shaul at the national level. In contrast to Shaul, David ha'melech considered bringing the "aron" to Yerushalayim as his highest national priority.

After the "aron" finally arrived in Jerusalem, the next step in David's master plan was to build a permanent house for the "aron", i.e. the Bet Ha'Mikdash in Yerushalayim:

"When the King was settled in his palace and God has granted him safety from his enemies [he'niach lo m'kol oyvav m'saviv], the King said to Natan the prophet: Here I am dwelling in a **HOUSE** of cedar wood, while the 'aron' is dwelling only in a **TENT!**" (see II Shmuel 7:1-2)

[Note again the textual parallel to Devarim 12:10-11]

Even though God informed David that Am Yisrael would have to wait another generation before the Temple could be built (in the next generation by his son Shlomo, see II Shmuel chapter 7), its precise site was already designated in David's own lifetime (see I Divrei Ha'yamim 22:1). In fact, David ha'melech himself prepared all the necessary building materials (see the remainder of that chapter).

If you read the above sources carefully, you'll see that the underlying reason for God's decision to delay its construction for one more generation stemmed from the need to wait until its 'function' - to make a Name for God - could be properly fulfilled.

## JERUSALEM TODAY

As we have seen in our study, according to the guidelines of Sefer Devarim - 'Jerusalem' is destined to become more than just the city that houses the Temple. Ideally, Jerusalem should become the National Cultural and Religious Center of the Jewish people, while making a Name for God. This aspiration is found in the prophecies of most all of the later prophets. For example:

"For Jerusalem will be called the city of Truth ("ir ha'emet"), and the mountain of the Lord of Hosts - "har ha'Kodesh" (see Zecharya 8:3).

"For out of Zion will come forth Torah and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem" (see Isaiah 2:3).

Today, be it for halachic, technical, or political reasons, we are not permitted to rebuild the Bet Ha'Mikdash. Until the proper time comes, this aspiration remains our national dream and an everlasting prayer. Nonetheless, to rebuild the city of Jerusalem as our National Center - a city of Truth, Justice, and Sanctity - is not only permitted, it is our duty. In our own generation, God has opened for us a historic opportunity. The achievement of this goal remains our national responsibility.

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

## FOR FURTHER IYUN

**A.** Even though the chagim have already been presented in Parshiot Mishpatim, Emor, and Pinchas, they are repeated again in Dvarim chap 16. Read this chapter carefully.

1. What laws are added which we did not already learn from the earlier sources?
2. What would you say is the primary topic of this perek? (which key phrase repeats itself many times?)
3. Attempt to explain this perek as an expansion of Shmot 23:14-17!
4. How does all this relate to the above shiur?
5. Why aren't Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur mentioned in this parsha?

## **B. "LO TA'ASUN KEYN L'HASHEM ELOKEICHEM" (12:4)**

In the above shiur, we explained that this pasuk implies that we are commanded not to worship God in multiple places of worship. This is "pshat" of the pasuk based on 12:2 and 12:5, For just as they worshiped their gods on the high places and under mighty trees etc. (12:2) you should not, rather - only in the place which God chooses ("ha'makom..."). That is, at **ONE** place and not at many places.

Note the two explanations given by Rashi. The first follows this reading according to "pshat". The second is a Midrash Halacha. Do these two pirushim contradict each other, or can they both be correct? Use your answer to explain the nature of Midrashei Halacha.

## **C. MIKRA BIKURIM - THE FINALE**

Note the final mitzvot of the chukim & mishpatim are Mikra Bikurim and vidduy maaser (perek 26), again focusing on **HA'MAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM** - (note 27:1 also).

1. Does this parsha belong in Parshat Ki-tavo, or do you think that it would be more fitting to Parshat Reay? Relate to the parsha of maaser sheni (14:22-29)! Why do think it was chosen to conclude the main speech? Relate your answer to the purpose of this speech, and the content of "mikra bikurim" and to Breishit perek 15.

**D.** Even though Sefer Breishit does not mention Jerusalem by name, it does mention the city of 'Shalem' (see 14:18) in relation to Malki Tzedek (note the significance of his name) and Mount Moriah (see 22:2,14), the site of the Akeyda', as Hashem YIREH. Together YIREH - SHALEM, may allude to the final name of this city - YERU-SHALAYIM.

## **PARSHAT RE'AY - Part Two**

Bad influences? Surely we should stay away from them, but how do we identify them? In Parshat Reay, we find an example of how the Torah deals with this problem, as Bnei Yisrael prepare to enter the land.

## INTRODUCTION

Our previous shiur on Parshat Re'ay, discussed how "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem" - emerged as its primary topic. Even though this holds true for chapters 12 and 15, chapters 13 and 14 appear to form a digression from this topic.

To illustrate how the topic of 'bad influences' is sandwiched with the topic of "ha'makom asher yivchar", the following table summarizes the main topics of the Parsha:

### **\* HA'MAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM**

- 12:1-19 - Establishing the Bet ha'Mikdash as the national center
- 12:20-28 - Permission for eating meat outside of that center

### **\* BAD INFLUENCES**

- 12:29-31 - Don't seek after the gods of the nations of Canaan
- 13:2-6 - Don't follow the instructions of a false prophet
- 13:7-12 - Don't follow a family member who may lead you astray
- 13:13-19 - Ir ha'nidachat - when an entire city goes astray
- 14:1-21 - Misc. dietary laws (what one cannot eat)

### **\* HA'MAKOM ASHER YIVCHAR HASHEM**

14:22-27 - Eating "maaser sheni" (there) in years 1,2,4,& 5  
14:28-29 - Giving this "maaser" to the poor in years 3 & 6  
15:1-18 - The laws of "shmittah" for the 7th year  
15:19-23 -Bringing the 'first born' to "ha'makom asher..."  
16:1-17 - Celebrating the "shalosh regalim, ba'makom asher..."  
=====

As you most probably have guessed by now, in our shiur we will search for a theme that ties all of these topics together.

#### **FOUR 'BAD EXAMPLES'**

To begin our shiur, we must first explain why we categorized all of the topics in chapter 13 as 'bad influences'.

Note how each topic relates to a certain warning that 'somebody else' will not lead you astray towards following other gods.

First we find a warning against following the gods of your 'non-jewish' neighbors (12:29-31). Then we are warned not to follow a charismatic leader (be he a 'prophet' or 'dreamer'), even if he performs a miracle, should he suggest that we worship a different god (13:2-6). Afterward, we are warned against following a family member or close friend who may secretly suggest that we worship a different god. Finally, as a society, we are warned not to allow an entire town to go astray; and if so, that entire town must be destroyed.

Note how we find examples of influences from:

- a) society at large, i.e. our global community
- b) our leaders, either religious or lay
- c) our family and close friends
- d) our city, i.e. our local community

These laws are followed by a lengthy list of dietary laws in 14:3-21. Note however that the reason for keeping these laws is given both at the beginning and end of this unit, in 14:2 and 14:21 - for you are an "am kadosh l'Hashem elokecha" - a designated [holy] nation for your God - hence you must separate yourselves from them.

Even though the Torah does not explain HOW these laws accomplish this goal, we know quite well from our daily life how the laws of "kashrut" severely limit our cultural contact with people of other religions. Therefore, we find yet another example of how the laws of the Torah protect us from the influences of those who may lead us towards following other gods.

With this in mind, we must now consider the connection between this unit of 'bad influences' and the primary topic of "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem".

#### **INFLUENCES - GOOD & BAD**

When we consider the purpose of "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem", i.e. the establishment of the city of Yerushalayim and the Bet ha'Mikdash as the nation's vibrant cultural and religious center, we find yet another example of what will influence the society of Am Yisrael, this time from the positive aspect.

In other words, Parshat Re'ay discusses all types of influences that will shape the nature of society (as Bnei Yisrael prepare to enter the land). First and foremost, by the establishment of "ha'makom asher yivchar Hashem" and the requirement that every Jew frequent that site and eat his "maaser sheni" in Yerushalayim, we assure the proper development of Am Yisrael as an "am kadosh l'Hashem".

By warning against bad influences, the Torah attempts to make sure that the fabric of that society won't crumble.

In Parshat Shoftim, we will find additional examples of what will provide a 'good influence' upon the nation. The Torah will discuss the judicial system, the priesthood, and the various other institutions of political leadership in their ideal form.

Till then,  
shabbat shalom  
menachem

## PARASHAT RE'EH

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

### SOME QUICK DERASH:

Parashat Re'eh begins with instructions about a peculiar ceremony to be enacted once the people reach Eretz Yisrael: they are to "place the blessing" on one mountain and "place the curse" on a mountain opposite it. Later on, Moshe will explain that the two mountains and the valley between them will be the scene for a covenant ceremony. There, the people will affirm the "blessing" and "curse." What does the Torah mean by "blessing" and "curse"? What good things does "blessing" entail, and what evil does "curse" connote?

### DEVARIM 11:26-28 --

"See that I place before you today BLESSING and CURSE; the BLESSING: that ["asher"] you obey the commands of Y-HVH, your God, which I command you today. The CURSE: if you do not listen to the commands of Y-HVH, your God, and stray from the way which I command you today, to go after other gods, which you have not known."

The Torah's formulation of "the blessing" is strange. Instead of telling us what great things are in store for us, the Torah tells us that the blessing is "that you obey the commands of Y-HVH, your God . . . ." Unlike Parashat Eikev, which spends so much time spelling out exactly what rewards Hashem will shower upon us for our obedience, Parashat Re'eh promises a lot but then refuses to give us details!

Reading further in the section above, we find that the Torah's formulation of "the curse" is also strange. Instead of telling us what evil awaits us for flouting Hashem's will, the Torah tells us that we will merit "the curse" if we disobey: ". . . if you do not listen to the commands of Y-HVH, your God . . . ." Why does the Torah bring up blessing and curse but refuse to define them?

Perhaps the Torah actually \*has\* spelled out the blessing and the curse! The blessing is not what "goodies" we can expect for doing the mitzvot, it is the very \*state\* of observing the mitzvot; the curse is not what punishments we will suffer if we ignore and violate the mitzvot, it is the \*state\* of ignoring and violating the mitzvot.

If you read Parashat Eikev, you come away understanding that obeying Hashem brings physical and spiritual rewards, while disobeying Hashem brings physical and spiritual punishment. Eikev posits a system of extrinsic reward and punishment. If I make Kiddush on Shabbat, for example, Hashem is 'pleased' and rewards me with, say, a new car, a good day at the office, a vacation with my spouse. If I spend Shabbat planting asparagus, on the other hand, Hashem is 'upset' (since planting is one of the chief categories of forbidden creative work) and punishes me with, say, tripping on a rake a few weeks later and fracturing my hip (God forbid!). So much for Eikev.

But Parashat Re'eh communicates another aspect of the scheme of reward and punishment, an intrinsic one. From this perspective, the greatest reward for the mitzvot is that we are in a state of observing the mitzvot themselves; the greatest punishment for averot (sins) is the state of having done averot. The ideal of human perfection is to achieve the stance of a servant of Hashem, an obeyer of His will. We do the mitzvot not in expectation of the "goodies" promised by Parashat Eikev, but solely for the purpose of standing before Hashem as His faithful servants. We obey Hashem's will because that is our highest value, not because we expect that he will do our will (i.e., make us happy by giving us things we want). This is the ultimate stance of the Jew, "the blessing": to respond to Hashem's command, to stand before Him and say, "Hineni," "Here I am." On the other end, disobeying Hashem is "the curse" not because of the extrinsic punishments it may bring, but for the position it represents in our stance before Hashem: we face the other way, giving Him our backs, disengaged, standing not before Hashem but merely by ourselves. This is the ultimate failure of human purpose, "the curse": to ignore Hashem's command, to stand before Him and say nothing in response to His command, or worse, to counter His will with our own.

These two aspects of reward and punishment, that of Eikev and that of Re'eh, are steps on the spiritual ladder. The conception which should guide us is that of Re'eh, while the conception of Eikev is there to encourage or warn us when our more lofty mode of interaction with Hashem becomes weakened. We do the mitzvot "Lo al menat le-kabel peras," as Pirkei Avot tells us -- not in order to earn reward -- but simply because we accept that obeying Hashem's will is the ultimate religious stance (exemplified best, probably, in the Akeida).

### NOW FOR SOME 'PESHAT': THE LAY OF THE TEXTUAL LAND:

Our parasha opens with Moshe's command to the people to enact a covenant ceremony on Har Gerizim and Har Eival when they enter the Land. Blessing will 'sit' on one mountain, curse on the other, and the people will accept Hashem's mitzvot under the terms of the blessing and curse. The command by Moshe to enact this ceremony constitutes an "opening bookend": it signals the beginning of a huge halakhic section which will continue from here (perek 11) to the beginning of perek (chapter) 27. Chapter 27 contains the "closing

bookend": it tells us once again about this blessing/curse covenant ceremony, this time in greater detail. Following this "bookend" is a lengthy section of blessings which we will merit for obeying Hashem and curses we will suffer for disobeying, Heaven forbid.

The long section between the "bookends" is halakhic (legal) material which covers just about all the bases the Torah has been to already in earlier sefarim (books) -- ritual law, interpersonal law, theological law, national institutional structure, and other categories of law and procedure. Many mitzvot which appear earlier in the Torah are repeated here, some with elaboration or modification; some mitzvot appear for the first time. It is typical of the Torah (and legal codes or parts of codes which have come down to us from Ancient Near Eastern sources) to find a section of law (halakha) followed by blessings and curses to reinforce the laws. This is a structure we see in the Torah in several places: Shemot 23 -- which comes after the halakhot of Parashat Mishpatim, the first major legal unit in the Torah -- contains mostly blessings (and some curses); a better example is VaYikra 26, a long section of blessings and curses which follows the huge section of solidly halakhic material which comprises the meat of Sefer VaYikra (pun not intended).

Our job in the series of parshiot ahead is not only to understand each of the mitzvot which Moshe commands, but also to extract from the flow of the text a sense of the underlying themes. Even at this early point, it is already clear that it will often be difficult to understand the sequence of the mitzvot, which tend to swing from one type of law to another without much warning and without an obvious organizing principle. When we cannot make sense of the connections between the various sections of halakhot before us, we will at least focus on the mitzvot of each section to deepen our understanding of them.

## THEMES OF RE'EH:

Parashat Re'eh brings together many themes. We will focus briefly on the following themes:

1. Centralization of worship in the "Chosen Place."
2. Worship of other gods (avoda zara) as an "interpersonal" crime.
3. Mitzvot in a communal context.

## THE CHOSEN PLACE:

Parashat Re'eh introduces the idea that once we enter the Land, it is no longer appropriate to serve Hashem in our backyards. Instead of sacrificing offerings to Hashem on our private altars (or on multiple public altars), we are commanded to bring all korbanot (offerings) to the "place Hashem will choose," the location of the Mishkan (portable Temple) or Beit HaMikdash.

Our parasha devotes a lengthy section to this theme of centralization and its reinforcement. But the opening words of the section seem at first to be about another topic: "You shall certainly destroy all of the places where the nations served . . . their gods, atop the high mountains and on the hills . . . you shall smash their altars, break their offering-pedestals; their asherim [trees used in idol worship] you shall burn with fire, and the idols of their gods you shall cut down." The Torah seems to be instructing us to eradicate avoda zara, not to focus our service to Hashem at one place.

But then comes a turn in the text: "You shall not do in this manner to Y-HVH, your God." Hazal interpret this pasuk (verse) to mean, "Although you should destroy all manifestations of idol worship, you are forbidden to destroy manifestations of the worship of Hashem." For example, according to Hazal, this pasuk would forbid destroying any part of the Beit HaMikdash, where Hashem is worshipped. But in context, the pasuk is not telling us to spare Hashem's sanctuary, it is telling us not to worship Hashem all over the place, as the Canaanites worshipped their gods. The next pasuk confirms this reading: "You shall not do in this manner to Y-HVH, your God. Instead, TO THE PLACE WHICH HASHEM, your God, SHALL CHOOSE from among all of your tribes, to place His Name there, ONLY HIS DWELLING should you seek and come to there." The Torah goes on to command us to bring all offerings to Hashem to the Chosen Place instead of offering them to Him wherever we may be.

It seems, then, that the command to destroy the numerous outposts of idol worship is not so much a command to eradicate existing idol-worship centers as it is part of the effort to centralize all worship. It is not simply that we are to avoid worshipping the old idols ourselves - even if we do not worship them, we must destroy every local temple, every neighborhood worship site. If we allow the local idol parlor to remain, we might be tempted to worship even Hashem there, which would defeat the effort to centralize His worship in the Beit HaMikdash.

The theme of centralization threads through the parasha and beyond. Some examples within the parasha:

- 1) Later on in the parasha, in instructing us how to handle ma'aser sheni, the "Second Tithe," the Torah commands us to bring it to the "Chosen Place" and eat it there.
- 2) Further in the parasha, we are commanded to bring all first-born animals to the "Chosen Place" for sacrifice.
- 3) Towards the end of the parasha, the Torah presents a Parashat Ha-Mo'adim, a section on the major holidays. Each holiday -- Pesah, Shavuot, and Succot -- is accompanied by a separate mention of the command to celebrate the holiday at the "Chosen Place." We are to sacrifice the Korban Pesah there and celebrate the harvest festivals of Shavuot and Succot there. After the Torah concludes its

exposition on each of the three "Regalim" ("feet," so named because part of the essence of these celebrations is making the pilgrimage to the Chosen Place), it moves to a slightly different theme: not only are we to bring the Korban Pesah to the Chosen Place on Pesah, not only are we to celebrate the harvest there on Shavuot and Succot, but we (I should say all males, "kol zekhurekha") are commanded to "appear" there before the "Face of Y-HVH." We are to make the pilgrimage not only to offer sacrifices and celebrate, but also to stand in the Presence of Hashem.

Why is centralization such a big deal? What difference does it make where we worship Hashem? Sure, it seems appropriate to have a main center of worship, but why is it necessary to outlaw worship at any other place? Several possibilities:

1) Although we suggested above that the purpose of destroying the many outposts of Cana'nite idolatry is to aid in the worship centralization process, and not to prevent us from worshipping the idols left behind by the Cana'anites, we could turn this theme on its head: perhaps the entire purpose of centralization is to prevent idol worship! Ideally, it would be nice to allow worship of Hashem everywhere. But worship of Hashem can easily deteriorate into worship of other things. If today I can bring an offering to Hashem in my backyard, ten years from now I may decide to bring an offering to the sun, which is, after all, a loyal servant of Hashem and might be understood to represent Hashem's power, His radiance, or His provident benevolence. Fifty years from then, I will have forgotten about Hashem and established a sun-worshipping cult.

If this seems far-fetched, check Rambam, Sefer Ha-Madda, Hilkhot Avoda Zara, Chapter 1, where Maimonides describes exactly this process -- not as a hypothetical possibility, but as history! Adam knew Hashem, and so did his descendants, but once they began to worship Hashem's intermediaries (e.g., stars) and creations, it wasn't long before the intermediaries became the focus and Hashem was forgotten.

That centralization is aimed at preventing avoda zara is hinted by a pasuk in the section on bringing ma'aser sheni to the Chosen Place: "You shall eat, before Y-HVH, your God, in the Place He shall choose to rest His Name there, the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, and the firstborn of your flocks and cattle, SO THAT YOU SHALL LEARN TO FEAR Y-HVH, your God, for all days" (14:23). What does eating all of this stuff in the Chosen Place have to do with fearing Hashem "for all days"? If we see the centralization drive as a brake on avoda zara, it makes sense that requiring us to ascend to the Chosen Place to celebrate before Hashem will contribute to our continuing to worship Hashem and not deteriorating into corruption back home.

2) One other possible rationale for centralization: to achieve national unity in worshipping Hashem. Considering the potential for distant relationships between the tribes, each of which has its own land, each of which is required to inmarry (until somewhat later on), each of which has its own defense forces and leaders, some structures are needed to bring the nation together, to bring the "states" into a "federal union." Besides the monarchy (which has its own problems), one of these structures is the Beit HaMikdash and its status as the center of worship of Hashem. Later in Sefer Devarim, we will see that the Beit HaMikdash unifies the people in another way: it is also the judicial center, the seat of the Sanhedrin, the Supreme Court.

3) Finally, centralization creates the opportunity for pilgrimage, which entails two elements: the journey and the arrival. The journey itself may be seen as more than simply instrumental: imagine the drama of leaving home and property behind, not to vacation or for business, but for \*religious\* reasons! When was the last time you went on a pilgrimage? Imagine the entire nation dropping everything, packing up, and hitting the road, headed for Hashem's House. The second element is the arrival, the experience of standing with all of Yisrael before the Face of Hashem, offering our gifts to Him and bowing before Him in submission and love. Neither the journey nor the arrival could be duplicated by a trip to the local synagogue (if you disagree, I'd love to hear about your shul!).

## **AVODA ZARA AS AN "INTERPERSONAL" CRIME:**

Usually, we conceive of avoda zara as a theological crime, a failure to achieve one of our most fundamental purposes as humans: to recognize Hashem and worship Him. Particularly if you believe, like some rationalists, that the goal of human existence is to cognize correct ideas about Hashem, to understand Him to the deepest degree possible, it is hard to imagine a greater misappropriation of our godlike potential than to accept and worship a false god. Avoda zara is not only a capital crime, it is also one of the "big three," the all-time cardinal-sin hit parade: avoda zara, gilluy arayot ("revealing nakedness," the cardinal sexual crimes), and shefikhut damim (murder). We are commanded to surrender our lives to avoid committing these sins. (There is a lot of halakhic detail involved in this issue; "consult your local Orthodox rabbi.")

But there are many indications in the Torah that there is another dimension to avoda zara, one we usually overlook and which I have termed (with considerable license) the "interpersonal" dimension. By this I do not mean that we somehow harm other people by worshipping avoda zara (although some forms of avoda zara, such as human sacrifice, can be hazardous to the health of other people), but that we 'harm' Hashem in ways we usually think of as interpersonal.

Although there are hints to this theme all over the Torah, we will look at only the few that appear in our parasha (if you are interested in pursuing this, I can provide a more complete list.):

Perek 13 presents three scenarios and prescribes our reactions to them:

a. A prophet appears, proves his or her authenticity by performing some sort of sign (usually making a prediction, which then comes true), and then delivers to us a command to worship gods other than Hashem. In response, we are to execute the prophet. The Torah's formulations in this context are critical: why does Hashem allow the prophet to make a true prediction, which creates the potential for us to be fooled into following him or her? The Torah explains: "For Hashem is testing you, to know IF YOU \*\*LOVE\*\* Y-HVH, your God, with all your HEART and all your SOUL." In other words, Hashem is testing not our theological fidelity, but the strength of our EMOTIONS: do we love Him? If we do love Him, worshipping any other would be inconceivable, literally adulterous. (Indeed, Tanakh takes full advantage of the metaphor of avoda zara as adultery, portraying Bnei Yisrael in times of idolatry as a woman who has rejected her husband and embraced other lovers in His place.)

The Torah's formulation of the false prophet's call to avoda zara is also revealing. The prophet calls, "Let us go after other gods ["elohim aherim"]" -- the Torah interjects, "WHICH YOU DO NOT KNOW" -- and the prophet continues, "and serve them." Not only are these "other gods," but they are gods that until now "you do not know." This phrase -- "you do not know" -- appears with startling frequency through the Torah and Tanakh as a characterization of the false gods we are warned not to embrace. Not only are they not true gods, but we have only heard of them today. So what? The point is that the true God is One we "know" so deeply, so intimately He is the God to Whom we as a people owe everything: as the Torah points out in the false prophet section, "he [the prophet] spoke untruly of Y-HVH, your God, who TOOK YOU OUT OF THE LAND OF EGYPT and REDEEMED YOU FROM THE HOUSE OF SLAVERY . . . ." This is the God we have rejected for some other God, as casually as if we were changing to a new toothpaste or trying a new flavor of ice cream. We forget what He has done for us and wipe clean the slate of our relationship to make room for something new and attractive. The "interpersonal" crime here is catastrophic ungratefulness, terminal insensitivity to our pre-existing relationship with Hashem. It is a failure of love.

b. The next section in Perek 13 presents a different tempter to avoda zara: "If he shall tempt you -- your brother, the son of your mother, or your son, or your daughter, or the wife of your bosom, or your friend who is like your own soul -- in secret, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' WHICH YOU HAVE NOT KNOWN, YOU AND YOUR FATHERS." Here again, the other gods are described not simply as meaningless and empty vanities, but as \*foreigners\* to an existing relationship; neither we nor our fathers have known them. Again, the Torah commands us to reject the temptation and, incredibly, to execute the tempter -- our own brother, child, spouse, or best friend. Here it is love versus love: whom do we love more, Hashem or the tempter? Hashem, the Torah reminds us once again, is "the One who took you out of Egypt, the house of slavery."

c. The last scenario described in Perek 13 is the "ir ha-nidachat," a city in Eretz Yisrael which has turned as a whole to idolatry. Not surprisingly, we are to execute the inhabitants for following the gods described once again as gods "which you have not known." Why such fury? Here again, the "interpersonal" appears: the Torah describes the wayward city as "one of your cities which Y-HVH, your God, gives to you." Hashem gives us a city, and we thank Him very much, forget Him, and take the city He gave us and turn it into a den of avoda zara. This is not simply theological error, it is profound ingratitude. What happens to the city itself, once the inhabitants have been destroyed?

"All of its booty [property], you shall gather to the midst of its street, and you shall burn in fire the city and all its booty completely ["kalil"] \*TO\* Y-HVH, your God . . . ."

The language the Torah uses is unmistakable: the city is being offered to Hashem as a korban, a sacrifice. It is burned not simply to destroy the scene of sinful disaster, it is burned "to Hashem," offered to Him. The word "kalil," "completely," adds to the picture: the same word appears in six other places in the Torah (to my knowledge). In every single instance, the context is a "cultic" one: "kalil" always appears in reference to the Mishkan and its appurtenances. Three of these six appearances refer to the completely blue color of draperies of the Mishkan's utensils, while the other three match our "kalil" exactly: they are references to completely burning a korban to Hashem (VaYikra 6:15, 6:16, Devarim 33:10). The wayward city, given to us by Hashem but then dedicated to the worship of a foreigner, is now being "rededicated" to Hashem through the smoke it offers to Him.

A look back at Devarim 4:19 deepens the theme of avoda zara as ungratefulness. Moshe delivers a warning about worshipping the heavenly bodies: ". . . Lest you lift your eyes heavenward and see the sun and moon and stars, all of the host of heaven, and you shall go astray and bow down to them and serve them - [those things] which Hashem, YOUR GOD, apportioned to ALL OF THE NATIONS under the entire heavens. BUT YOU, Y-HVH took you [the Torah here hints to marriage with the word 'lakah'], and HE TOOK YOU OUT of the iron melting pot, Egypt, TO BE FOR HIM A TREASURED NATION . . ." What does Moshe mean here, that Hashem "apportioned to all of the nations under the entire heavens" the sun and moon and stars? It seems clear from the next phrases, which are set in opposition: the sun and moon and stars have been apportioned to the nations, but you, Bnei Yisrael, Hashem chose you to be His nation, to worship Him alone, and He therefore rescued you from the death-house of Egypt. Now that He has done all this for you, you 'owe' Him your allegiance.

Rashi, Rashbam, and Hizkuni all confirm the above interpretation of the pasuk -- Hashem does not really care all that much if the other nations worship the sun and stars and moon, but He certainly does care if you, Bnei Yisrael, reject His selection of you and forget what He has done for you. Our responsibility to serve Hashem flows not simply from recognition of theological truth, but from a profound sense of gratitude.

## MITZVOT IN A COMMUNAL CONTEXT:

Moshe takes Sefer Devarim as an opportunity not only to strengthen, chastise, and remind us of the mitzvot, but also to introduce the integration of mitzvot with the concept of community. Even the most careless reading of our parasha turns up an incessant preoccupation with the idea of mitzvot in the communal-social context. In the course of discussing mitzvot which seem completely unconnected to the idea of community, Moshe seems to never fail to say the "c" word. Moshe is trying to communicate that serving Hashem does not happen in a vacuum, it takes place in the context of a community, with all of its entanglements, complexities, and problems.

In commanding us to bring all offerings to Hashem only in the Chosen Place and to celebrate there, Moshe adds, "You shall celebrate before Y-HVH, your God, you, your sons, your daughters, your servants, your maidservants, and the Levi in your gates, for he has no portion [of land of his own] among you." Just when we thought we had left the community (and perhaps the family as well) behind to go and serve Hashem in the rarefied holiness of the Chosen Place, Moshe, so to speak, shleps the entire mishpaha and community along with us, using the code word for home city -- "sha'areikhem," "your gates." In case we missed the point, Moshe repeats the whole list of relatives a few pesukim later and specifically warns us to take care of the landless Levi.

The same reminders appear slightly later, in Perek 14. Not only are we to bring ma'aser sheni to the Chosen Place, we are to enjoy it there along with "our household" and, of course, the hapless Levi (I am taking this a little personally since I, as a Kohen, am a member of Levi and get no land). But not only is he a hapless Levi, he is "the Levi in your gates [bi-sh'arekha]" -- he is part of your community, so you are connected with him as with your family.

The very next section picks up and amplifies the same theme. We are to make the ma'aser of the third year available to the Levi (again described as landless) and to the stranger [ger], orphan, and widow, all of whom are "bi-sh'arekha." They are in our gates, so they are ours. Not only are we obliged to support the disadvantaged, we are to involve them in our mitzvot.

The Torah continues with the laws of Shemita, the seventh year, in which all debts owed by Jews to Jews are canceled. Despite the approach of Shemita, we are to continue to generously lend money to the poor, who are not simply our brothers, they are also "be-ahad she'arekha" -- they are within our gates. We are made responsible not just for luckless individuals, but for members of a community to which we and they belong. There will always be poor people, after all, and they will be poor within our communities: "Ki lo yehdal evyon mi-kerev ha-aretz," poor people will never disappear from THE MIDST OF THE LAND. We are therefore commanded to open our hands to our poor brothers -- "in your land."

When we ascend to the Chosen Place on Shavuot and Succot to celebrate, the Torah reminds us again to include our families and the disadvantaged -- the Levi, stranger, orphan, and widow, who are "among you" and "in your gates." We are responsible for our communities, especially responsible to include the powerless and downtrodden in our celebration. Our mitzvot are not crafted to raise us up out of involvement with the 'messy' aspects of life, they are crafted to raise up the community as a whole, bringing happiness to the weak and a spirit of generosity to the powerful.

The community appears in the parasha in the most surprising places. The Torah instructs us not to eat "neveila," meat from an animal which is improperly slaughtered. Instead, we are to give the meat to the "ger asher bi-sh'arekha," the stranger "in our gates," the non-Jew who lives temporarily among us and for whom the Torah makes us responsible.

Even in instructing us to punish sinners, Parashat Re'eh keeps the community in mind. The false prophet does not simply appear, he or she appears "in your midst," "be-kirbekha." When the prophet is executed, we are not simply punishing a sinner, we are acting for the good of the community -- "you shall remove the evil from your midst," "mi-kirbekha." This phrase, "u-vi'arta ha-ra mi-kirbekha," is so common in Sefer Devarim that it is almost a cliché of the Sefer.

Mitzvot are not only personal. We are responsible not only to perform "prescribed actions" for our own growth or edification, but to create and support community in doing so. Failing to achieve this second element is not just leaving the icing off the cake, it compromises the very fulfillment of the 'personal' mitzvah itself:

RAMBAM, HAGIGA 2:14 --

When one sacrifices holiday offerings and celebration offerings, he should not eat with just his children and his wife alone and imagine that he has done a complete mitzvah; he is REQUIRED to bring joy to the poor and the disadvantaged . . .

RAMBAM, YOM TOV 6:18 --

. . . But one who locks the doors of his courtyard and eats and drinks, he and his children and wife, and does not give food and drink to the poor and the embittered of soul, this is not the joy of a mitzvah, it is the joy of his belly . . .

May we maintain a focus always on Hashem, the "Makom" wherever He is, and build communities of mitzvot with sensitivity to those who need assistance.