

**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 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”.

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.

**PENILESS 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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*Conectándote al Judaísmo*

*Free will*

*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**  
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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 כְּסָפִים —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 תִגְעוּל דָּלַת בְּקִנְי לְרוּיָן, 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



### **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**

פְּרַשְׁתַּי רְאֵה תַש"פ

רְאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרִכָּה וּקְלָלָה

**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 *Parshas 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 *yeshiva*, when it was still situated in Zichron Yaakov. The *bachurim*, *yeshiva* 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/strip 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 *hadassim*; 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 *hadassim*, without all of the *pitchfikes*, 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 enjoyment which is reiterated on that very day by the Creator Himself. This can be derived from the *pasuk* in *Krias Shema: V’hayu ha’devarim 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 ואבתך  
**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 ... וההסידה

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"ה

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