

Parsha Re’eh starts: “See, this day I set before you Blessing and curse. Blessing if you obey the commandments of the Lord your G-d that I enjoin upon you this day, and curse if you do not obey The Commandments of the Lord your G-d.”

In my dvar I would like to illustrate the importance of visual imagery in this and other parshiot of Devarim, so that the Israelites and ultimately we choose the correct path. I want to parallel that with how I’ve gradually come to see and understand parsha Re’eh. First I’ll give a brief summary of the parsha.

We learn of the centrality of worship, so local sites and alters including those of pagan cults are to be dismantled and destroyed. We learn that meat can be eaten at all locations, not just at the central sanctuary. We are instructed to not learn foreign practices so that we are not lured into practicing them, also to not follow false prophets, those who are not loyal to G-d.

We are instructed that the Israelites care for the Levites and poor, that there be remission of debts in the 7th year. We are instructed that the Israelite slave is to be freed in the 7th year and not to let him go empty handed. We learn about the dietary laws and celebrating holy days at the central sanctuary.

When I first read this parsha, I felt like the wicked and simple sons from the Hagaddah. I asked what does much of this have to do with me and what is much of this about. Of course I acknowledge the importance of helping the needy, tithing, following dietary laws and observing the festive holidays. Some of the other rules I could not connect to. Maybe it’s because we’ve been instructed repeatedly about rules and regulations at least the last several parshiot or maybe it’s because I get a glazed look when I have to read hospital bylaws.

The commentary describes the Israelites then as an adolescent nation. John Hirshctick last week spoke of Moses as a parent. Usually, if we tell our adolescents over and over that they have to do something, they may be less receptive than if given a choice. But we also know all choices have consequences. Sometimes misperception leads us in the wrong direction. Take the episode of the spies.

You remember that one man from each tribe was sent to scout the hill country of the Amorites, the scouts saw the giants who terrified them. Except for Caleb and Joshua the Israelites refused to go. As a result G-d sent the Israelites to march into the wilderness.

Sometimes what we perceive and our behavior as a result can lead us to our own destruction, such as what happened with Baal Peor. You recall that sexual attraction to Moabite women led many Israelites to participate in sacrificial feasts at shrine of Baal peor. G-d ordered a plague in response.

In parsha Va-ethanan we hear about our love for G-d in the Shema. Parsha Re'eh speaks of seeing and we read in Devarim of powerful visual imagery to get the point across to make the correct choice. Abraham Joshua Heschel states "the essence of Jewish religious thinking does not lie in entertaining a concept of G-d but in the ability to articulate a memory of moments of illumination by G-d's presence." He speaks of Israel as a people of witnesses.

In Devarim we are reminded by hearing as well as seeing about G-d's love for us and the importance of our devotion to G-d.

In parsha Re'eh Moses uses visual imagery when he speaks of the two mountains, the blessings would be pronounced at Mount Gerizim and the curses at Mount Ebal.

According to the Plaut Chumash commentary, Mount Gerizim has springs and fruit covered terraces, and Mount Ebal is barren and bleak

Earlier we were reminded of the Israelites at Mount Horeb, "the mountain was ablaze with flames to the very skies, dark with densest clouds. The Lord spoke to you out of the fire; you heard the sound of words but perceived no shape, nothing but a voice." We read about Moses when he was told by G-d that he could look across to Jordan and see the good land but could not enter it . We are also reminded how "G-d took us out of Egypt by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty, and outstretched arm and awesome power, as the Lord your G-d did for you in Egypt before your very eyes."

We heard in Denise Forbes' dvar earlier the importance of putting on Tefillin "bind them as a sign upon your hand and set them as a symbol above your eyes". It says in our siddur that the messages in the Tefillin teach us the unity and uniqueness of G-d, recall the miracle of the Exodus and affirm our duty to serve G-d with all our being. We learn in the Shema about other visual mitzvot, Tsistit and inscribing His words upon the doorsteps of our homes and gates.

As I study this parsha, I think of a line in Shacharit service "Lead me on a proper path, open my eyes to the wonders which come from the Torah."

I am very appreciative of being able to understand a little better this parsha.

In this parsha, we learn about the importance of the centrality of the sanctuary. I initially had trouble understanding the significance of that. Dr. Mark Brettler in the Jewish Study Bible speaks of a marked similarity to Devarim and writings during the reign of King Josiah circa 600 BCE. King Josiah tried to keep Judean religious, political and cultural autonomy in light of threats by Assyria, Babylon and various forms of worship including pagan cults.

As I’ve studied this parsha I’ve begun to see that some of these commandments are also blessings.

When I read again about the centrality of worship I could not help but think how important our synagogue is to me. My children had their bnei mitzvot here and my wife had her adult bat mitzvah here. I come here to say Kaddish for my parents, may their memories only go higher. I recognize how important it is to be present for others who are saying Kaddish and to celebrate the simchot of others. Torah days are a time when we can say a Mishaberach for those who are ill. We pray as a community for Israel’s welfare. For me morning minyan is a time when I think about the new day and all my blessings. It is a time of reflection and mindfulness in an otherwise very busy day.

Our synagogue has given Laura and me the blessing to have good friends and make new ones. In the morning prayer we read “how good is our portion, how pleasant our lot, how beautiful our heritage.” In this parsha we read about Pesach, Shavuot, and Succoth, the Shalosh Regalim and the emphasis on the centrality of the sanctuary as well. How fortunate that we are able to celebrate together such wonderful holidays and also to celebrate our relationship with G-d. As it mentions in the Chumash commentary, we remember where we came from, who freed us, and who guides us on our path.

As I mentioned earlier in parsha Re’eh we are commanded to care for the poor, that there will be no needy among us, of freeing the slave in the 7th year and not empty handed and remission of debts in the 7th year. We are commanded to provide for Levites, the strangers, fatherless and widows. We read that Israel is a holy nation, a society of justice, equality and love. We read that with rituals we are reminded of the mitzvot of behaving ethically.

In parsha Re'eh we are instructed to destroy all the sites where other nations have worshipped, whether on lofty mountains, on hills or under any luxuriant tree. Of course as Jews we do not worship nature but we thank G-d for creating nature. Our liturgy has beautiful prayers thanking G-d for his creations. In the Shabbat psalm we give thanks "Your works O Lord make me glad. I sing with joy of Your creation. How vast Your works, O Lord. Your designs are beyond our grasp."

Sometimes we see but really don't see. How often do we walk our usual route and not notice G-d's gifts in nature. We often take all of our blessings for granted.

We have prayers to thank G-d for smelling fragrant trees and shrubs, seeing a rainbow, the ocean, blossoms for the first time. Baruch Sheh Amar is a way of thanking G-d for creation and for nature. When I'm walking the dog at 6am grumbling to myself, I try to focus on G-d's gifts to us through nature, and it often puts me in a better frame of mind. In the Shacharit Amidah we praise G-d for His miracles that daily attend us, for all His wonders and gifts that accompany us, evening, morning, and noon.

In this parsha, we learn the Israelites will be able to eat meat anywhere and not just at the time of sacrifice at the central sanctuary. We hear about the dietary laws. Although I do not eat meat, for me the dietary laws signify the importance of being mindful when I eat, and for thanking G-d for what we have. In parsha Eikev we read "when you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your G-d for the good land which He is giving you." This is the basis for the commandment to recite Birkat ha mazon. In parsha Re-eh we are reminded that when an animal is slaughtered, we do not eat its blood. As noted in the Chumash commentary, in this way we are reminded of the sanctity of life.

This time of year is a time of transition. For some of us, our children will soon be starting or returning to school. The leaves are just beginning to change. As we approach the High Holidays, may we pray that our eyes are open to choose wisely and with mindfulness. May we choose right from wrong and a life of mitzvot. May we choose to look for G-d's inspiration all around us.

As we pray in Birchot HaShachar, "Praised are you Lord our G-d King of the universe Who guides us on our path".

Shabbat Shalom.