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Re'eh 5780

Choose Life

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This week's parsha, Parshas Re'eh, opens with:
- ראה, אנכי נתן לפניכם היום: בְּרָכָה, וּקְלָלָה -
See, I (Moshe) present before you today a blessing
and a curse;

אֶת-הַבְּרָכָה--אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמָעוּ, אֶל-מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה
אֶתְכֶם, הַיּוֹם,

The blessing that you listen to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today; And the curse: if you do not listen to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, and you stray from the path that I command you today, to follow the gods of others, that you did not know (Devarim 11:26-28).

This passage is very evocative of a similar one that appears later in the book of Devarim:

רָאה נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם, אֶת-הַחַיִּים וְאֶת-הַטּוֹב, וְאֶת-הַמָּוֶת, וְאֶת-הָרָע

See, I have placed before you today life and good, and death
and evil...

הַעֲדָתִי בְכֶם הַיּוֹם, אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת-הָאָרֶץ--הַחַיִּים וְהַמָּוֶת נָתַתִּי לְפָנֶיךָ,
הַבְּרָכָה וְהַקְּלָלָה; וּבַחֲרָתָּ, בַחַיִּים--לְמַעַן תַּחְיֶה, אַתָּה וְזַרְעֶךָ

I call the heavens and the earth today to bear witness against you: I have placed life and death before you, blessing and curse; and you shall choose life, so that you will live, you and your offspring (Devarim 30:15,19).

Putting these two passages together, we can conclude that as Jews, we are constantly faced with choices in life. We can choose Torah, mitzvos, maasim tovim, an all encompassing life of godliness; and then we have chosen טוב חיים, בְּרָכָה, blessing, life and good for ourselves. Or, R"l (may the Almighty have mercy upon us), one can choose the other way, and the Torah delineates that this leads to an existence (or non-existence) of קְלָלָה, מָוֶת, רָע - curse, death and evil.

There is a beautiful homiletic interpretation on the opening words of our parsha: "ראה אנכי" - see me!" Moshe Rabbeinu was saying to the Bnei Yisrael, and to us, "See ME." See what a person can become, the levels one can reach, the

spiritual accomplishments one can attain, when he chooses life: the bracha of a life dedicated to Torah and mitzvos.

R' Soloveitchik zt'l teaches, "The recital of the bracha (Birkas Ha'Torah) in the morning suffices for the whole day and also for the night study, whereas other birkos ha'mitzvos are canceled by hesech ha'daas (distraction from the act at hand). If I should take off my tefillin for a while not intending to put them back soon, and then I change my mind and I want to put the tefillin on, it requires another bracha. However, reciting Birkas Ha'Torah in the morning relieves me of the duty of reciting the bracha (over Torah study) for twenty-four hours."

Why is this so?

"Tosfos (Brachos 11b) note this difficulty and explain that there is hesech ha'daas with regard to other mitzvos but not with regard to Torah for we are duty bound to study (it) all the time. It is difficult to understand the answer... Why shouldn't one recite the Birkas Ha'Torah if he is ready to read the Torah after a long intermission during which he has not even thought of engaging in the study of the Torah?

"... We understand the answer of Tosfos when we realize that Birkas Ha'torah is related not to the explicit intellectual preoccupation, which is not continuous, but to the emotional consecration and involvement associated with a state of mind, with love for and devotion to the Word - and this involvement is a permanent, continuous experience which cannot be interrupted or canceled. Of course, emotional involvement sometimes is an acute experience, an explosive experience - I think of my great treasure and my heart overflows with love - and sometimes it is a latent experience; however, this love can never be extinguished.

"Let us take our relationship to children. There is certainly emotional involvement with children, devotion, but you cannot say that experience is at all times identical.

Sometimes it is an acute experience, when I play with the child, when my heart overflows with love for the child, I experience an explosive feeling which demonstrates itself in some external traits, like an expression of my face and so forth. It is an acute experience. And frequently, when the father is in his office or in his shop and his mind is occupied with matters, it loses its acuteness and explosiveness and turns into a latent feeling. Yet he can never forfeit its greatness and depth.

“This is exactly my relationship to Torah. The emotional involvement is a continuous experience, sometimes in an acute stage, sometimes in a latent stage, in an inactive stage. Yes, sometimes the acute experience is sharp with passion, and overabundant feelings, and sometimes, under other circumstances, it is a quiet experience; when the mind is occupied with other matters it loses its acuteness and explosiveness and turns into latent feeling. Yet the father can never forget the child and can never stop loving the child, and this is exactly valid with reference to Torah. The emotional attachment (to Torah) is never broken” (Blessings and Thanksgiving, p.55-56).

A grandson of R' Aharon Leib Shteinman zt'l (1914-

2017) once asked him, “Sabba, why don't you go away for a few days to rest and improve your health?” R' Aharon Leib smiled and replied, “I feel healthy enough without going on vacation! Learning Taharos in depth... is far more enjoyable than any vacation. As for rest, I'll rest in Shomayim after 120.”

Rav Shteinman's talmid, R' Yitzchak Levenstein, once made arrangements for the Rosh Yeshiva to stay in a room in a yeshiva outside Bnei Brak for a few days of respite. When he heard of the plan, R' Aharon Leib smiled and said, “Yitzchak, I appreciate your good intentions. If you want to do me a real favor, perhaps arrange a bein ha'zmanim kollel. I would be willing to give a shiur to the avreichim at the conclusion of each day. The harbatzas ha'Torah would make me feel far better than any vacation! (Reb Aharon Leib, Artscroll, p.286).

“רֵאֵה אֲנֹכִי”, See me”, Moshe Rabbeinu exhorts us. Choose a life of Torah - of unwavering devotion and emotional attachment to Torah and mitzvos - and see what a person, a mere mortal, can achieve and become. Halavay that we might merit but a fraction of such greatness, as we choose life every day.

Is Kosher Food Healthier? Does it Matter ?

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Parshat Re'eh reviews Jewish dietary laws supplying a sweeping list of banned foods. It catalogues kosher and non-kosher animals, bans the drinking of blood, mentions the prohibition of mixing meat and milk, and also references the procedure of shechita. These comprehensive details regulate the entire experience of eating and dining. In our era, which unfortunately has witnessed a broad decline of full halachik observance, observance of kosher food regulations remains a baseline for religious identity. We often refer to those who observe Shabbat and maintain kashrut as “Orthodox” Jews even as we hope for their adopting a more augmented and expanded religious lifestyle.

At first glance, many of the laws of kashrut seem random. Admittedly, the prohibition of drinking blood, is understandable as this act seems barbaric. Likewise, many commentators have identified logical reasons for prohibiting the mixing of meat and milk. However, the actual list of kosher and non-kosher animals appears to be extremely arbitrary. Kosher species are determined by

physical animal attributes which do not directly correlate to any apparent function. It is not obvious, nor has it been proven, that animals with split hoofs are healthier than their counterparts. Fins and scales don't directly reflect higher grades of fish. If the list of kosher animals feels random, then the intricate laws of shechita seems puzzling and bereft of any logical explanations. Do these kashrut rules and regulations, which so deeply permeate our experiences, possess any logical explanations?

An interesting midrash (Breishit Rabbah 44:1) does imply that shechita restrictions have no particular rhyme or reason: “Does God really care whether shechita is frontally executed (which is permitted) or performed on the back of the neck (which is improper)? Rather, the laws of shechita were installed solely to purify human behavior [through obeying God]”. This Midrash may imply that there is no essential difference between legal shechita and disqualified shechita. The process is only meant to test our obedience and build religious discipline. If religious discipline and submission to G-d are the ultimate goals, the actual content

and core logic of these practices is less significant. What is significant is our ability to submit to the Divine will.

Similar impressions emerge from Rebbi Elazar Ben Azaryah's very provocative declaration (Sifra 20:26): "A person shouldn't be disinterested in forbidden foods. Rather, a person should desire forbidden items but abstain solely because of Divine decree." If forbidden foods were inherently harmful it would be absurd to encourage us to covet these toxic items. The simple interpretation of this Midrash implies that kosher food possesses no medical or health related advantage to non-kosher food. We avoid consuming these foods exclusively because of Divine command. Conceivably, God could have instructed us to consume pig while banning cows. Our compliance is purely based upon submission to the Divine decision, but not based on any other benefit or advantage.

By and large, Jewish tradition doesn't endorse this extreme but interesting perspective. We believe that every Divine command must be based on some inherent logic and must be geared to our benefit and prosperity. Every mitzvah is built upon a solid logical foundation—some reasons are revealed to human intellect whereas the logic of mitzvot such as as parah adumah and sha'tnaez remain inaccessible. God doesn't command or instruct in an arbitrary fashion and, at some level, - perhaps beyond human comprehension- his mitzvot are beneficial while His prohibitions are dangerous. Many medieval authors catalogued ta'amei mitzvot or "reasons" for various mitzvot- a program which presupposes logical foundations for mitzvot. If the Rambam identified reasons for mitzvot it was because he believed that God would not just randomly issue commands. There must be some underlying logic and the Rambam determined to illuminate that logic.

The conviction that kosher food is healthier than non-kosher food may have been more compelling in an ancient world which knew less about the human body and human health. In a world of hit-or-miss medical knowledge it was easier to suspend contemporary science and assume that kosher food was medically preferable to non-kosher food. The modern world has mapped human biology and possesses a more precise knowledge of the roots and causes of human health. As modern science hasn't proven any advantages of kosher food, our belief that kosher laws are geared to human health and prosperity is less obvious and requires critical reinforcement.

Beyond the specific details of kashrut, the more

general sense of limiting the range of foods we consume, is an important concept. Limiting the types of foods which can be eaten can help lend dignity and restraint to an experience which, if left unregulated, can become animalistic and degrading. Presumably, with more limited food options, Jews are less prone to gluttony, drunkenness and many other forms of vulgar behavior which can stem from overindulgence in eating. If the Torah is meant to help us even slightly dislodge from the sway of the flesh, laws governing our eating habits are central to that goal. Interestingly, the modern changes in the availability of kosher food have dramatically altered the equation and diminished this particular function of kashrut. Overwhelmingly, Jews enjoy almost unlimited access to kosher food and obtaining kosher food often requires few serious compromises. The national spread of kosher food in Israel as well as the burgeoning of kosher supervision in the broader Jewish world have created almost unlimited availability of kosher food. Though this development is welcome and enables a broader spread of kashrut observance, this change also lessens the potentially healthy impact of curbing excessive food indulgence.

Secondly, kosher food establishes an important socio-cultural barrier between Jew and non-Jew. Because food and dining is such a central element of cultural experience, kashrut regulations create distinct cultural identity and, to a degree, reinforce separation of the Jew. Throughout the generations, our Masorah installed additional food-related prohibitions to more fully enforce these essential cultural barriers. Laws banning wine which was handled by a Gentile or kosher bread manufactured in non-Jewish settings, further delimited Jewish cultural experience. A separate Jewish diet is intended to demarcate a separate Jewish cultural identity. The kashrut 'cultural barrier' continues to influence Jewish public experience even in the world of modern kashrut.

Though the specific details of kashrut seem arbitrary they possess profound logic, as God banned us from consuming hazardous items while allowing beneficial foods. Modern science hasn't yet traced human health and well-being to kashrut laws but we still trust that this system isn't random. In a broader sense, limiting us to kosher foods is a method of curbing against the potential imbalances of unlimited food consumption. Secondly, kashrut experience erects vital cultural barriers intended to safeguard our unique Jewish identity. As the patterns of kosher food change it is important to revisit these seminal principles.

Don't Believe What You See

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

In what became popularly known as the Invisible Gorilla experiment, Christopher Chabris and Daniel Simons demonstrated the phenomenon known as selective attention. During the experiment, people were asked to count how many times a basketball was being passed in between six participants in a video. Twenty seconds into the video, a person dressed in a gorilla costume conspicuously walked through the people passing the ball, banged on his chest, and continued walking through the scene. At the end of the video, the participants were asked how many passes they counted. They were then asked if they saw the gorilla, and shockingly, around 50% of the participants did not notice it at all. When I have informally showed the video to students in my psychology courses, half the class usually does not see it as well.

The experiment reveals that people often miss things that are right in front of their eyes. Because they focus their attention on one thing (counting the passes), they totally miss something completely extraordinary (a man in a gorilla costume). In their book, *The Invisible Gorilla*, Chabris and Simons use this experiment, among others, to make a broader argument about the limits of human intuition. Besides for not seeing things that are right in front of us, sometimes we mistakenly see things that aren't really in front of us. Gustav Kuhn, a professor from the University of London, investigates the psychology and neuroscience behind magic tricks. One trick that he has studied is the Vanishing Ball Illusion, in which a magician uses misdirection to make people think that they saw a ball vanish in mid-air. In his book *Experiencing the Impossible: The Science of Magic*, Kuhn provides numerous explanations for such illusions, but what is plainly clear is that people really believe they saw something that didn't actually happen.

The Blueprint for Success

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

There are times when studying the Torah that we are faced with a verse with seemingly obvious directives yet lacking any formal sense of how to apply them to our daily lives. In these instances, the commentaries serve a pivotal role in teasing out the ideas the Torah is presenting. One such example occurs in

As is alluded to in the name of the parsha, Parshat Re'eh is heavily concerned with seeing. The beginning of the parsha is startling in its simplicity: see the blessing and the curse in front of you and choose the blessing. Yet, as the parsha continues, vision is anything but black and white. A running theme throughout is that without intervention, human nature will lean us towards seeing and doing what is correct in our own eyes - "hayashar be-einav" (Devarim 12:8). What is necessary, in contrast, is to follow instead what is correct in the eyes of G-d - "hayashar be-einei Hashem", as is emphasized three times (Devarim 12:25, 12:28, and 13:19). The message is clear - trust G-d's eyes and His perspective, not our own perception.

This lesson is embedded in two other instances in the parsha, emphasizing how easily our eyes can be deceived easily by others. First is concerning the false prophet, who will use signs and wonders—magic tricks, if you will—to try and convince us to follow other gods (Devarim 13:3). But how can one know if a prophet is false? If his "magic" leads us away from G-d, it is deception, not reality. Immediately after discussing false prophets, the pesukim continue with another threat to our eyes: if we have a relative or friend who tries to convince us to follow other gods, we cannot listen or follow him. Yet, because we have such a close relationship with that relative or friend, our intuition may be to empathize. Therefore, the pasuk says that "our eyes should not have pity on him" (Devarim 13:9).

As much as we may think we see everything accurately, we often miss important information or see things that aren't actually true. The message of Parshat Re'eh is to acknowledge our own limitations of perception and correctness and rely instead on the wisdom and vision of G-d and His Torah.

Parshas Re'eh, where the plan to the proper life is drawn up in a fascinating manner.

Within the midst of the section regarding the false prophet, we come across an awkwardly written verse:

"You shall follow the Lord, your God, fear Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him, and cleave to

Him.” (Devarim 13:5)

Taken literally, the verse does not seem to add anything whatsoever to our understanding of the obligations of the Jewish people. Rabbeinu Bechaye (1255-1340), in his commentary on the Torah, offers an explanation as to what is being referenced. He begins with the instruction to “follow” God, an allusion to God’s middot, or traits. We find a similar concept noted later in the Torah with the directive of “vehalachta bedrachav”, meaning “you should follow in His ways”. However, in following these middot, we must act in a cautious manner. We should “fear Him”, meaning we should investigate not the essence of the middot, but the actions themselves.

Rabbeinu Bachaye continues to the next directive, that of keeping His commandments and heeding His voice. Keeping His commandments refers to adhering to the written Torah given to Moshe at Sinai, containing the 613 commandments. What about heeding His voice? He explains that this alludes to both the prophets, as well as the Oral Law, the tradition emanating from the prophets. The very structure of the mesora, the passing down of the Torah and its ideas from generation to generation, is prefaced on the initial receiving of the complete Torah by Moshe at Sinai. Moshe passed it to Yehoshua, Yehoshua to the elders, the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Great Sages. Rabbeinu Bachaye pivots to the idea of worship from the verse, offering a one word clarification: tefila (prayer). This all culminates in the final command, that of cleaving to God.

Rabbeinu Bachaye offers three distinct explanations for cleaving. His first possibility is that even in a time of “reshut”, meaning a time where one is not engaged in a specific commandment, one’s thoughts should be attached to Him, and one should not separate oneself from this state of mind for even a singular moment. The second possibility is that one should not ever desire to leave the worship of God. Normally, a servant naturally yearns to be free of his master. Even if his master is caring and benevolent, the notion of being subservient to someone else produces a strong urge to be free of the state of slavery. Thus, we are told we need to cleave to the serving of God, and to not desire to separate and be free, as serving God is the “true freedom”. Finally, he offers one more explanation – God, in using the term cleaving, is referring to the promise of the reward of olam haba, the World to Come. If we follow all the above directives, we will merit the highest possible

“cleaving”, found in olam haba.

We are faced with several questions regarding this elaborate explanation. For one, what ties together these different orders? How does tefilah fit alongside adherence to the Torah? What is Rabbeinu Bachaye referring to in the first and second directives, following God’s middot with limitations and caveats? Then there are the three different explanations offered for the concept of “cleaving”; what is each one teaching us?

The overall approach could be in understanding that the verse is alluding to the blueprint established by God for humanity’s perfection as a species. The first part deals with the appropriate philosophical framework of the individual. One must be drawn to God, looking to emulate His ways. The middot of God, observed through Divine Providence, offer the gateway to understanding Him. One should recognize that these middot reflect the paradigm man should strive for in his thoughts and actions. However, in this very analysis lies the critical reality that we are qualitatively removed from God. We can never truly understand the essence of God and His relationship with man. Thus, we see the framework of how man should approach the study of God – drawn to study but understanding the intrinsic limitation.

In the second section, we see the importance of observing the commandments, along with recognizing the entire system, whether it be written or oral, is of Divine origin. Simply put, this is focusing on the practical requirement for the individual, that the Torah be followed.

Finally, there is tefilah. Tefilah is another paradigm, a paradigm of humanity ordering the psyche in the proper way. When a person engages in tefilah, one offers praise to God, understanding oneself as compared to the Creator. Requests are placed for needs, an acknowledgment of being a dependent existence. These experiences re-orient one’s normative psychological makeup, leading to the correct state of mind.

To summarize, then, one can see from the above explanation that God is giving the Jewish people a formula to achieve the correct path of life: develop and advance the appropriate philosophical mindset, adhere to the commandments, and orient the psyche away from the ego and towards the true understanding of one’s self. Put together, the paradigm individual emerges.

This overall approach is essential in understanding the next explanations concerning cleaving to God. Quite

obviously, cleaving to God cannot have any interpretation rooted in the physical. Thus, Rabbeinu Bachaye sets out to offer three different possibilities.

The first of these, as mentioned above, is that one should always be involved in thinking of God, even in times of “reshut”. In essence, what he is saying is that if a person correctly follows the blueprint laid out in the verse, an overall change emerges in one’s existence. One naturally desires to remain there, abandoning any pull towards that which is outside. The concept of cleaving in this instance refers to the person’s strong attachment to the ideal state of existence, that which follows the various directives of the verse.

In the next explanation, Rabbeuni Bachaye writes that one should not desire to leave the state of servitude to God, as a slave normally would seek freedom. There is a certain intimidation that can overcome someone when beginning to contemplate what God has demanded of us. Every part of who must be dedicated to serving God. This counters a normative viewpoint that people have of the idea of being free. Freedom quite often conjures up the notion of “doing whatever I want when I want”. To live an unrestricted life without boundaries is to many the highest expression of freedom. Yet such a person fails to see how often in fact he is not as free as he hopes to be. One is beholden to the physical needs of the body, forced to obtain nutrition. Often there is succumbing to emotional whims and fancies, unable to shake free of overwhelming desires. One can be constantly fooled by an outsized view

of the self, the ego changing fantasy to fact. The point here is that a person’s notion of freedom is in fact quite often an illusion. Judaism, according to Rabbeuni Bachaye, offers the true idea of freedom. It re-defines how freedom should be viewed, noted in his use of the term “true freedom”. When a person follows the formula for the ideal life, the objective of creation is reached. This is the “true” freedom. If someone understands and internalizes this idea, he will never perceive the worship of God as a servitude to escape.

Finally, there is the explanation of *olam haba* as an expression of cleaving. When a person reaches the highest state of existence, knowing and serving God become the *raison d’être*. *Olam haba*, as Rabbeinu Bachaye notes, is conceptually the same idea, albeit in a completely different situation. While the rationale for following God’s commands should not be to receive some type of reward, we still must have knowledge of *olam haba* and how it is our eventual fate. One hopes to merit an eternal state of paradigmatic existence in the World to Come.

Clearly, this is a brilliant exposition of the above verse by Rabbeinu Bachaye. God presents to the Jewish people the blueprint for true success. No doubt, there is a certain elegant simplicity in all this, almost like a mathematical formula that leads to the ideal state. On the contrary, the path is a challenging one, where we face emotional hurdles and intellectual quandaries. Fear of traversing the path, though, is not an option, as long as we see the objective ahead.

Prophet of Idolatry and Enticer Thereto: Who is Worse?

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

In our parshah, the Torah addresses several instances of people who attempt to lure others to *avodah zarah* (idolatry). Let’s look at a few of these cases:

“Should there arise in your midst a prophet or a dreamer, who provides a sign or wonder that comes true, and he (the prophet or dreamer) says: ‘Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and serve them.’ - You shall not listen to that prophet or dreamer, for Hashem your God is testing you, to determine if you love Hashem your God with all your heart and all your soul... And that prophet or dreamer shall be put to death...” (Devarim 13:2-6)

“If your brother... or close friend shall entice you, saying to you in private: ‘Let us go and serve other gods which you and

your forefathers have not known.’... - You shall not desire or listen to him... you shall surely kill him.” (Ibid. v. 7-9)

One who attempts to cause others to serve *avodah zarah*, by reporting that he received a prophecy that the *avodah zarah* should be served, is punished by the Sanhedrin with *Chenek* (Strangulation), whereas one who attempts by means of friendly persuasion to cause others to serve *avodah zarah* is punished by the Sanhedrin with *Sekilah* (Stoning). The perpetrator in this latter case is called a *Maisis* (Enticer to Idolatry - v. Rambam in *Sefer Ha-Mitzvos*: negative mitzvos 16 and 26).

Chenek is the lightest of the Torah’s *Arba Misos/Capital Punishments*, and *Sekilah* is the severest of them. What is

so vastly different between one who uses false prophecy in an effort to entice another into avodah zarah, such that he is punished with Chenek, and one who does so by way of friendly persuasion (a Maisis), for which the punishment is Sekilah? One would think that these two sins are pretty much the same, and that if anything, the use of false prophecy would be a graver infraction. What is it about a Maisis that incurs the far harsher punishment?

It would seem that the distinction is predicated upon a fundamental aspect of human nature. Although one would expect the false prophet, who seeks to demonstrate and prove the validity of avodah zarah through signs and wonders, to be more effective and hence more of a danger to Torah belief than a Maisis, who merely “schmooses” with others in his efforts to lure them into idolatry, the Maisis is actually more of a hazard. This is because people are not as much logical creatures as they are social creatures, and they are thus more prone to sin as a result of warm and friendly words than as a result of deductive logic. The Maisis, whose congenial “reaching out” and “partnering” with others, trying to get them to be “team players” and go along with his new fad, is far more dangerous than the mock rationality and pseudo-prognostications of a false prophet. Establishing social connections and channels of friendship - the Maisis’ tools of trade - is a far more impactful tactic than empirical thinking and cognition, which are the deceptive implements of the false prophet.

Building a National Family

Rabbi Jonathan Ziring

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said to them: Go out and see, what is the straight path that a man should follow?... Rabbi Yehoshua said: A good friend. Rabbi Yosi said: A good neighbour... He said to them: Go out and see, what is the evil path that a man should avoid?... Rabbi Yehoshua said: A bad friend. Rabbi Yosi said: A bad neighbour.” (Avot 2:9)

In Moshe’s final days, his last task is to prepare the Jewish people to enter the Land of Israel and establish a country founded on the Torah and all it represents. Thus, he outlines or reiterates the mitzvot that are most relevant for nationhood (such as the laws of court systems and the army) and inspires the Jews to develop perspectives and attitudes crucial to living full religious lives (such as love

The Rambam (Hil. Yesodei Ha-Torah 8:1-3) explains that B’nei Yisroel’s foundational belief in Hashem is not due to the signs and wonders that Moshe Rabbeinu performed, for those signs and wonders were necessities rather than cornerstones of faith. Rather, Ma’amad Har Sinai, the Revelation at Sinai, in which we as a people saw, felt and experienced the truth of Hashem and His Torah firsthand and not through signs - which people are at times prone to dismiss as fraudulent - established our people’s unequivocal and bedrock faith. (The Rambam on Devarim 13:2 presents a similar idea.) The Rambam elaborates that this in-person, firsthand Sinai experience is supreme and absolute, and overrides any attempted contradictory proofs.

Although one would think that logic and empirical reasoning are more powerful than personal, emotional appeal, such is not the case. Human nature is not to be extremely logical, but is instead to be easily influenced by social dynamics. The Torah therefore meted out the harshest of treatment to the Maisis, who takes advantage of people’s social and emotional weak points in an effort to undermine their service of Hashem and disenfranchise them from their Sinaitic commitment and heritage. False prophecy, with its pseudo-proofs and deceptive reasoning might be impactful, but it pales in comparison with a warm word, a hand on the shoulder, a smile and a pep talk, geared to induce one to sin.

Such is the unparalleled danger of the Maisis.

and fear of G-d).

Towards these ends, Moshe cautions the Jews that their commitment will be threatened if they surround themselves with the wrong influences. Thus, in Parshat Re’eh, Moshe warns the Jews to:

- Destroy the idols of the native nations (12:2-3).
- Not fall under the sway of the gods of those nations (12:29-31).
- Ignore the words of, and execute, false prophets (13:2-6).
- Have no mercy on those who tempt them to serve idols, even intimate family members (13:7-12).
- Eradicate the ir hanidachat, the city that has shifted its allegiance and worshiped idols (13:13-19).

In the following parshah of Shoftim, on the other hand, Moshe demands that the Jews surround themselves with positive influences. Hence, he discusses the laws of establishing a court system, including the roles of both judges and enforcers. He outlines the place in society of the Kohanim and Leviim, the ritual and educational leaders. Moshe tells the Jews they will have no need for necromancers, because they will have prophets who can convey the word of G-d to them. [For more on these themes, see Rabbi Menachem Leibtag's discussion of them, here: <http://tanach.org/dvarim/rey2.txt>.]

The pivot, between cautioning against exposure to negative influences and pushing to find positive ones, takes place in Devarim 14. "You are children of Hashem your G-d. Do not gash yourselves or shave between your eyes because of the dead. For you are a holy people for Hashem your G-d: Hashem your G-d chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people." What about these few words explains the transition between these two aspects of Moshe's exhortation?

The question of who the Jewish people should associate with comes down to the question of who we are, an idea which is at the core of the mitzvah in this passage. As Ibn Ezra writes, the Jews are forbidden from mourning too much because they must know that they are the children of G-d, and He is watching them lovingly, ensuring that things will work out for the best. Ramban notes that this commandment was already given to the Kohanim in Vayikra (25:1). Its repetition here for all Jews highlights

that every Jew is holy and must strive to act accordingly; the Jewish people are all kohanim. Taking Ramban and Ibn Ezra together, this mitzvah reminds the Jews that they are the "family members" of G-d, tasked with a mission. With their destiny in mind, they should naturally avoid all who would hinder their path forward, and seek out those who will aid in the fulfillment of their goals.

Our Sages saw yet another mitzvah embedded in these verses. "Lo titgodedu – lo ta'asu agudot agudot – do not make many groups" (Yevamot 13b). The rabbis understood that this verse enjoined Jewish leaders to avoid factionalism, working together to come to agreement and not issue contrary legal positions within single communities. Whether this is because we want to avoid machloket (Rambam, Hilchot Avodat Kochavim 12:14), or because we don't want the Torah to look like two Torot (Rashi to above), this law requires leaders to speak, as much as possible, with a single voice and present a unified vision.

This is the connective tissue between the messages of Re'eh and Shoftim. It is not enough to avoid those whose negative influence is apparent. If leaders want to inspire their people to realize its purpose, they must be united. Infighting, even for the sake of G-d, can disenchant people and hinder their progress as much as exposure to external temptations. Thus, even if we each contribute in our own ways, we cannot forget that we are a family, together seeking to ensure that our Father's values find proper expression in the world we build.