

Parashat Re'eh 5780, 2020:

The Power of Free Will

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, Dovid Shmuel ben Chasiyah and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

This Shabbat has two complementary identities. It is known first and foremost as Shabbat Parashat Re'eh after the name of this week's Torah reading, and secondly, as *Shabbat Mevarchim Chodesh Elul* — the Shabbat whereupon we announce and bless the upcoming month of Elul. This month is preeminently the period of the year when we look back at our accomplishments and failures, reviewing the commitments we made to Hashem, and those we failed to keep. In part, this means that we must ask ourselves if we used our time properly during the past year: Did we use it to serve *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and keep His *mitzvot*, or did we chase after the fleeting fads and foolishness that pass for much of the culture of our age? On measure, Elul emerges as a time of deep introspection, when we encounter ourselves and unflinchingly examine our motives, actions, and choices. In a very real sense, we are in search of ourselves. As such, Elul reveals itself as the time to discover who we really are, and prepare for the awe-inspiring rendezvous with our Creator that takes place during the *Yamim Noraim*.

Based upon the dual nature of this Shabbat, it is particularly fitting that our *parasha* begins with the celebrated words:

Behold, I set before you today a *bracha* — blessing and a *klalah* — curse. The blessing, that you will heed the commandments of the L-rd your G-d, which I command you today; and the curse, if you will not heed the commandments of the L-rd your G-d, but turn away from the way I command you this day, to follow other gods, which you did not know. (*Sefer Devarim* 11: 26-28, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

In essence, this *pasuk* speaks about the theological principle of *bechirah chafshite* — free will, applied in this instance to choosing to follow the Torah and repudiate other gods or, G-d forbid, reject Hashem and His Torah and worship idols. Moreover, it is quite reminiscent of another verse in *Sefer Devarim* where this concept is writ large:

This day, I call upon the heaven and the earth as witnesses [that I have warned] you: I have set before you life and death, the *bracha* — blessing, and the *klalah* —curse. *U'varchata ba'chayim* — You shall **choose** life, so that you and your offspring will live. (30:19)

The Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) addresses *bechirah chafshite* in an extended fashion in *Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah*, chapters five and six. One of the most direct statements of his analysis of this concept is found in the following *halacha*:

This principle is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and Commandments, as the Torah states: “Behold, I have set before you today life [and good, death and evil].” (*Sefer Devarim* 30:15) Similarly, the Torah states, “Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse],” (11:26) suggesting that the choice is in our hands. Any one of the deeds of men which a person desires to do, he may, whether good or evil. Therefore, the Torah says: “If only their hearts would always remain this way.” (5:26) From this we can infer that the Creator does not compel or decree that people should do either good or bad. Rather, everything is left to their [own choice]. (5:3, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger with my emendations)

In sum, the Rambam maintains that *bechirah chafshite* is a fundamental concept and pillar upon which the entire Torah rests. In addition, the term “free will” must be taken at face value, for as the Rambam states in two earlier *halachot*:

Free will is granted to all men. If one desires to turn himself to the path of good and be righteous, the choice is his. Should he desire to turn to the path of evil and be wicked, the choice is his... Each person is fit to be righteous like Moses, our teacher, or wicked, like [King] Jeroboam. [Similarly,] he may be wise or foolish, merciful or cruel, miserly or

generous, or [acquire] any other character traits. There is no one who compels him, sentences him, or leads him towards either of these two paths. Rather, he, on his own initiative and decision, follows the path he so chooses. (5:1-2)

I believe that one of the vital lessons that Chodesh Elul teaches us is that, while *bechirah chafshite* has great power, it contains, in equal measure, great responsibility. In other words, we must remember that each of our free-willed choices affects not only ourselves, but in a very real way, the entire world. Rabbi Elazar son of Rabbi Shimon gave powerful voice to this idea when he declared:

Since the world is judged after the majority of its deeds, and the individual is judged after the majority of his actions, if he does one *mitzvah*, he should rejoice, for he has tilted the scales of justice for himself and the entire world *l'kaf zechut* — toward the side of merit. [Unfortunately, however,] if he does one *aveirah* — sin, woe unto him, for he has tilted the scales of justice for both himself and the entire world to the side of guilt. (*Talmud Bavli, Kiddushin* 40b, translation my own)

With Hashem's help may we ever be vigilant in our exercise of *bechirah chafshite*, and recognize the power with which it is endowed. In that way, may we be among those who rejoice as we help bring ourselves and the entire world *l'kaf zechut*. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom, and may Hashem in His great mercy remove the *magafah* from *klal Yisrael* and from all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>
They may also be found on <http://www.yutorah.org> using the search criteria Etengoff and the *parasha's* name.

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3

format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.