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Re'eh 5782

The Lord's Children

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered September 2, 1967)

Normally, when the Torah records a mitzvah or commandment, it does so without offering any reasons or explanations. In this morning's portion, however, we read one commandment for which no less than two explanations are offered. The Torah tells us, *Lo titgodedu* – you shall not cut any gashes in your body as a sign of mourning. It was the custom of the pagans of antiquity that as a sign of grief they would cut into their flesh until they bled. In prohibiting such disfigurement, the Torah begins by telling us *Banim atem La-shem Elokekhem*, you are children of the Lord your God, and then after the commandment it explains, *ki am kadosh ata*, for you are a holy people.

These two explanations – that of being a holy people and that of being children of God – were interpreted by one of our most eminent commentators (R. Yosef Bekhor Shor) as follows: It is not fitting for a member of a venerable people, possessing a proud and sacred history, to tolerate such disfigurement; in addition, every man must remember that he is a child of God. Therefore, even if he suffers excruciating loneliness because he grieves for a lost parent or other relative, he must recognize that his solitude is never absolute, for he is a child of God, and his Heavenly Father lives forever. Therefore, in addition to the dignity of being a Jew, his mourning must be tempered by the knowledge that man is never alone as long as God is there.

Actually, these two motifs can serve as splendid insights into all the commandments of the Torah. All the mitzvot enhance the dignity of the Jew as a Jew; they reinforce his nationhood and endow it with a particular grace. Furthermore, in addition to the nationalistic aspect, there is a purely spiritual obligation that man owes to his Creator.

Of course, the two elements of nationalism and religion are truly universal. We need no elaboration of the prevalence of nationalism as a fact of modern experience.

What is interesting is the most recent confirmation of the irrepressibility of religion as a natural inclination of man. Only this week we read how in Russia itself, on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution, the Russians have discovered that the third generation born into official governmental atheism still shows remarkable signs of religious initiative. The daughter of Stalin speaks of God, the Christian sects refuse to disappear, and communist youth publications still must debate the existence of God and of religion in their newspapers.

But whereas the two facts of nationalism and religion are indeed universal, with Jews they are especially important because they are so intimately associated with each other. One category flows into the other, and one cannot exist without the other. Perhaps this is what our great Kabbalists meant when they said in a most interesting comment in the Zohar (to Mishpatim, 97b-98a): Who is a child of the Holy One? When one reaches his thirteenth year he is called *ben li'knesset Yisrael*, a child of the congregation of Israel; and when he is twenty years old – if he is deserving because of his obedience to Torah and the Commandments – he is called *ben le'Kudsha Berikh Hu*, a son of the Holy One. And that is why it is written, *banim atem la-shem Elokekhem*, you are children of the Lord your God.

In other words, the nationalistic awareness and the spiritual striving are two levels of maturity that are indigenous to every Jew. He cannot attain spiritual eminence and fullness unless he is first *ben li'knesset Yisrael*, a loyal son of Israel; and once he has become a loyal child of his people, he is on his way to becoming a child of God.

That this is so has been amply demonstrated in recent months and years. For one example, Elie Wiesel in his *Jews of Silence* tells of his experiences when he recently visited Russia. One of them is especially worthy of retelling. A certain Jew in Russia was known to be a mohel, which is,

of course, a completely illegal profession. He did his sacred work clandestinely, at the risk of imprisonment or exile or even death. One day, this mohel heard a knock on his door and the man who opened it was a colonel of the Russian Army in full uniform. "Is it true," asked the colonel of the frightened Mohel, "that you circumcize children?" The man denied it vehemently, frightened at the appearance of this army officer in full regalia. "I do not believe you," said the colonel, "and I order you immediately to get dressed, take your bag of instruments, and follow me." When the mohel did so, the colonel blindfolded him, took him by his arm out of the door and into his car. After a frightening half hour drive in which not a single word was exchanged, he was led out of the car and into a house. There his blindfold was removed, and he saw before him a woman – obviously the wife of the colonel – in bed with an eight-day old infant. "This is my child," said the colonel, "and I want you to perform the circumcision at once." After the mohel did so, he was asked for his fee, and replied that he would not charge anything at all for this mitzvah. But the colonel insisted, paid him well, gave him some gifts, blindfolded him once again – he would trust no one with the knowledge of his illegal act – and returned the mohel to his home.

Here, then, was a man born into a materialistic and atheistic society, deprived of even the most elementary Jewish educations but who nevertheless recognized himself as a *ben li'knesset Yisrael*, as a Jew – and this feeling translated itself into the performance of a great mitzvah, although the entire idea was so vague and alien to him intellectually. Intuitively he knew that once you seek to identify yourself as a *ben li'knesset Yisrael*, you already are on your way to a *ben le'kudasha Berikh Hu*; every act of Jewishness, no matter how apparently inexpressive of spiritual content, is in and by and of itself at least a partial confirmation of the acceptance of the Holy One.

Indeed, the world saw this when at the capture of Old Jerusalem, many young Israelis who had never seen a picture of tefillin gladly and enthusiastically donned their tefillin at the Western Wall. Once we recognize *ki am kadosh ata*, then we are ready to approach *banim atem la-Shem Elokekhem*; a child of the congregation of Israel is on his way to being a child of the Holy One.

This places upon us religious Jews a dual obligation. One is to encourage every manifestation of Jewishness, no matter how superficial and vacuous it may seem to us who are more committed. It means that every self-identification as a Jew is a spiritually precious phenomenon.

And second, it means that we ourselves must make the trek from Jewishness to Judaism, from our national consciousness to a spiritual consciousness, from being a son of our people to being, as well, a son of the Lord our God.

Indeed, this is the essence of the month of Elul which we welcome this day. The entire summer is spent by the Jew in concern with his people, in affirming *ki am kadosh ata*. We observe Tisha Be'Av, and mourn over the destruction of the Holy City, the Temple, and our national independence. Then we emerge into Shabbat Nahamu and the shiva de'nehemta, and we entertain the consolations that are promised to us in the future – and this year, thank God, we were able to experience this consolation in the present as well. And then, out of this profound awareness of each of us being a *ben li'knesset yisrael*, we come to the last month of the year, the month of repentance when we reach out for God Himself. It is during this season of repentance, beginning with the month of Ellul until the end of the High Holiday season, that we recite each day the psalm that begins with *le'David ha-Shem ori ve'yish'i*. In it David speaks of his confidence in God despite all the enemies that beset him. And in one particularly moving verse he cries out, *ki avi ve'imi azavuni ve'ha-Shem yaasfeni*, though my father and mother forsake me, nevertheless the Lord will gather me in. Even when the *ki am kadosh ata* is in jeopardy, even when my knowledge that I am a *ben li'knesset Yisrael* is not of much avail to me because I, together with my people, am surrounded by oppressive and cruel enemies, even then I realize that the ultimate anchorage of our people is in heaven itself. Though earthly parents abandon us, or do not understand us, or have left us orphaned, yet the Lord is our ever loving and eternal Father, and it is to Him to whom we look for our ultimate help and redemption.

That must be our special spiritual orientation on this day and for the months and season that follow. We must strive for the greater and more mature status of *ben le'kudasha Berikh Hu*. And David told us how to strive for that in the verse immediately following his declaration of faith in our Heavenly Father: *Horeni ha-Shem darkekha, u-neheni be'orah Mishor*. Teach me, O Lord, Thy way, and lead me in the path of righteousness. Give me the strength to observe Thy Torah and commandments, and then we will have fulfilled the great and ineffable potential with which we were created – the image of God.

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On Location

Rabbi Joshua (*The Hoffer*) Hoffman z"l

This week's parsha begins with the statement, "Behold I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing that you hearken to the commandments of the Lord, your God, that I command you today. And the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the Lord, your God, and you stray from the path that I command you today to follow the gods of others, that you did not know" (Devorim 11:26-28). Rashi explains that the blessing and curse referred to in the opening verses are the same blessing and curse that the Torah goes on to describe in the following verses, and in greater detail in parshas Ki Savo, as a process to be carried out after God brings the nation into the Holy Land. The blessing - or, as Rashi explains, based on the Targum, those who bless - will be on Mt. Gerizim, and the curse - or those who curse - will be on Mt. Eival. Rabbi Shlomo Goren, in his *Toras HaMikra*, asks, if the process referred to in the opening verses will not take place until after the people enter the land, as described in the later verses and in parshas Ki Savo, why does the Torah say that the blessing and curse are presented today?

Actually, a number of commentaries explain the word 'ha-yom' - today - as referring, not so much to a point in time as to a certain mental attitude. Rabbi Eliyohu of Vilna, or the Vilna Gaon, for example, explains it to mean that a person should not think that his current behavior is determined by the way he acted in the past. Even if a person has not, in the past, observed God's commandments, the Gra says, he can decide today to begin to observe them. Rabbi Moshe Sofer, known as the Chasam Sofer, explains the word 'today' as an evocation of the teaching of the rabbis, based on a verse in the first paragraph of the Shema, in parshas Vaeschanan, that a person should always view the commandments as if they were given today, thus giving him a sense of freshness and excitement when he fulfills them. A person needs this sense in his actions, and if he does not experience it in his observance of the mitzvos, then he may very well turn to other systems of belief, namely idolatry, to find it. That is why, in fact, the Torah here says that the curse will come if we do not hearken to the mitzvos, "and you stray from the path that I command you today, to follow the gods of others." Still, the simple reading of these verses is that the Torah is discussing something that is happening that very

day, while, according to Rashi, it is actually describing a process that will happen later, after the nation enters the land. What, then, does the Torah mean when it says 'today' in the opening verses of parshas Re'eh?

Rabbi Goren answers that the covenant being described here by the Torah is one by which the people become responsible for each other. This principle underlying this covenant, is described by the rabbis as 'all Jews are a surety, or responsible, one for the other.' Because of this principle, when one Jew commits a sin, his fellow Jews share, in some sense, in the responsibility for it. There are different opinions in the Talmud concerning the different kinds of sins to which this principle applies, and also concerning when the principle actually went into operation, as discussed in the Talmudic tractates Sanhedrin, 27b and 43b, and Sotah, 37b. Rabbi Goren writes that the generally accepted approach is that this kind of responsibility began in respect to open transgressions even before the Jews entered the land, but began for hidden transgressions only after they entered. Thus, when the Torah tells us that God is placing a blessing and a curse before the people 'today,' it is referring to open, known transgressions, responsibility for which the people accepted upon themselves even before they entered the land. Once they entered the land and stood before the two mountains, they made a covenant accepting responsibility for hidden sins, as well. Since responsibility for hidden sins was taken on immediately, when the verses in our parsha were stated, says Rabbi Goren, it is appropriate for the Torah to write, "I place before you today."

Based on this explanation of Rabbi Goren, we can further understand why the covenant made in Eretz Yisroel itself would be made at the location of the two mountains mentioned here. Rabbi Hillel Lieberman, Hy"d, in his commentary *Ahavas HaAretz*, points out that these mountains are located in the city of Shechem, and proceeds to mention a number of events that occurred in Shechem that warrant its choice as the location of this covenant. One event that he does not mention in this regard, but which I believe is the key to this city's choice as the location of the covenant, is the sale of Yosef to the passing merchants, generated by the dispute that his brothers had with him. Through this sale, Yosef descended to Egypt, and, eventually, his family followed him, paving

the way for the nation's exile. Yosef was in Shechem because his father, Ya'akov, sent him there to look after the welfare of his brothers, while his sale to Egypt bespoke a lack of responsibility for his welfare, as exhibited by his brothers. It was only when Yehudah told Ya'akov that he would act as a surety for his brother Binyomin that Ya'akov allowed the brothers to take him down to Egypt in order to get food from Pharaoh's second in command, who, unbeknownst to them, was actually Yosef (Bereishis 43:9). This assumption of responsibility was in stark contrast to the way in which the brothers had acted towards Yosef when they encountered him in Shechem. Thus, a major theme behind the conflict between Yosef and his brothers was the need for Jews to take responsibility for each other. This factor was brought out very prominently in the city of Shechem,

where the process of Yosef's descent to Egypt began.

The concept of mutual responsibility that Jews must show for each other is based, according to the medieval Talmudic authority Rabbi Yom Tom ben Avraham, known as Ritva, in his commentary to Rosh Hashanah, on the notion that all of Israel form one collective body. In other words, there is a concept of the corporate entity of the Jewish people that makes them responsible for each other. The lack of mutual responsibility shown by the brothers in Shechem is what caused the initial descent of the nation into Egypt. The culmination of that exile would only come when the nation accepted its full measure of mutual responsibility, at the covenant which was entered into at Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Eival, which are located in Shechem, where the process began.

Personal Responsibility

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Adapted by a Talmid)

In the beginning of this week's Parsha, the Pasuk says: *Re'ei Anochi nosein lifneichem ha-yom bracha u-klala.* Behold, I am placing before you today a blessing and a curse. In English, it does not sound very unusual. However, in Hebrew, the word *re'ei* is a singular verb, while *nosein lifneichem ha-yom* and all the following pesukim are in plural. Why does the very first word speak in lashon yachid, while the continuation speaks in lashon rabim? Meforshim give many answers to this question. Alshich says: Hashem gave everyone His Torah—*nosein lifneichem ha-yom bracha u-klala*—rewards and punishments. What's the problem with something given over to the rabim? You know. . .there are millions and millions of Jews in the world—fabulous, terrific Jews. What might a person say? Since there countless wonderful Jews in the world, if I slack off a little, it's not so terrible. If I don't do the mitzvos and care about my own ruchnous, it's not a big deal because so many other frum people are doing mitzvos. Therefore, explains the Alshich, the Torah started with the word *re'ei*. Each person should see that Hashem doesn't only want Am Yisroel to worship him collectively. He is interested in each and every Jew—each one of us. All of us are chashuv in his eyes. Each person should realize that his avoda is chashuv—and not only the avoda of the klal.

The Klei Yakar takes this further and quotes Chazal: Every person should see every moment as if their mitzvos and aveiros are exactly fifty-fifty—balanced on the scale. The next choice they make will tilt the scales and

determine their fate. Not only that, but they should also see their own town, country, world, and the entire universe as if it was (and perhaps it is) in a state of fifty-fifty. And they should think: Would I give in to my Yeitzer Hara and do the wrong thing now? Or do I make an extra effort and do the right thing? Do I put more effort and feeling into my mitzvos, or not? My one action could tilt the entire world from potential destruction to zechus and salvation! You never know how weighty the implications of the actions of any one person could be. Maybe the next action—a mitzvah or an aveira—of someone who is not a President or a Prime Minister, or a General, nor a big Rabbi or a Rosh Yeshiva—someone who is just a regular person—an accountant, a doctor, or a lawyer, an eighteen-year-old, or a seventh grader—can tilt the scale and make a difference in the fate of the entire Jewish people and all of humanity.

The Rambam says in his Hilchos Teshuva (3:4): What does Shofar remind us? *Uru yesheinim mei-sheinas'chem*—wake up from your slumber. And the Rambam says: Why? Not only so that you realize that you are responsible for your mitzvos and aveiros, and that there are more important things than partying, eating good food, drinking good Scotch, and making money. Part of waking up from slumber is escaping the trap of saying: I am nothing. I am batel be-shishism, be-elef, in a million-billion. A healthy humility can unfortunately turn into laziness, low self-esteem, and not taking oneself seriously. I must remember that even though I am one of nearly eight billion people,

my actions could have completely unpredictably grand consequences. Maybe my mitzvah is the last one Hashem is waiting for to bring the Geula (or a personal geula). Therefore, the Torah says the singular Re'ei—each person should see that Anochi nosein lifneichem ha-yom. I am giving it to everyone, but each person could make a difference for everyone. And everyone should say: *Bi-shvili nivra ha-Olam*—Hashem created the world for me. And it doesn't mean for me-of-next-week or next year. It means, for me right here, right now—Whenever I must decide whether to do a mitzvah or not do an aveira. Maybe that will make a difference in the entire world. It's so

Setting Limits and Expectations

Rabbi Yosef Goldin

The flow of the passuk is difficult to understand ... In the middle of this week's parsha, Moshe issues a rousing and inspiring description of our unique connection to the Almighty, as he declares, "*Banim atem laHashem Elokeichem*", "You are children to Hashem, your G-d..." - then abruptly the passuk continues with instructions to the nation not to cut themselves nor make a bald spot between their eyes when mourning the dead.

The meforshim struggle to find the connection between the two parts of the passuk- between our status as G-d's children, and the prohibition to self-mutilate out of mourning. There are many other mitzvot or prohibitions that could have been mentioned to highlight our unique relationship with G-d- why did the Torah specifically mention this prohibition?

But I believe an even more fundamental question should be asked...

When we imagine G-d as our father, we think of a loving parent who sustains us and gives us all that we need. Based on that imagery, we would've expected the continuation of the passuk to describe all the wonderful things that G-d gives us as an expression of this father-child relationship. Why does the Torah instead reference restrictions that Hashem places on us? In what way are restrictions- any restrictions- a demonstration of His being our Father?!

It appears the Torah is teaching us an incredibly important lesson about the parent-child relationship, and about parenting in general. Although the foundation of the parent-child relationship is the unyielding love the parent has for the child, that love is often expressed in two different ways- endless giving and setting limits.

appropriate that this is an introduction to Chodesh Elul. This year, Shabbos Parshas Re'ei is also Rosh Chodesh Elul. *Uru yesheinim mei-sheinas'chem*, as Rambam says, is the wakeup call of the shofar that we start blowing from Rosh Chodesh Elul. It reminds us of our true priorities in life and our true role and place in the world—how chashuv we are to Hashem. He has an entire world of billions of people, and yet, up there in Shomayim, He is looking at our next decision to see if it will bring the world one step closer to its Geula—*Be'ezrat Hashem—be-meheira be-yameinu*.

Shabbat Shalom.

The aspect of giving is the most obvious and evident of the two. As parents, we not only give our children life itself, but our daily lives are spent providing for our children in so many ways. From the moment they are born, we dedicate our lives to caring for their every need. As we have mentioned previously, often such endless giving is not simply the result of our love for our kids, but also forms the basis for that love.

There is, however, another way that we express our love and concern for our children- by setting limits and creating expectations for how they should act. While it seems counterintuitive to consider these to be acts of love, they are in fact true expressions of love. When we set limits and create expectations for our kids, the underlying message we relay is that we care about them, as our love is the basis for these limits. If we didn't care about them at all, then we wouldn't care about their actions - only because of our care for them do we place rules upon their behaviors.

This idea is expressed in a Midrash Torat Kohanim (2:2) describing the reason for the laws of Kashrut. The Midrash explains that G-d places restrictions upon the foods that we eat because of our special relationship with Him. Due to His special love for Am Yisrael and His concern for our spiritual health, He demands that we avoid eating certain foods that negative impact us spiritually.

This idea manifests itself in the world of psychology and mental health as well. While there are various forms of what is known as "child neglect," one form is when parents do not properly supervise or set boundaries for their children. When a parent fails to set rules for his children, the underlying message the parent gives is that he doesn't

really care about them, and therefore allows them to do whatever they want. While initially, the child may enjoy the complete freedom, ultimately the child feels a deep sense of neglect and abandonment by the parent.

Of course, this aspect of parenting isn't simple or easy. Kids have an aversion to rules or limitations being placed on them- and especially as teenagers, they often fight us tooth and nail over such rules. This is particularly true in today's society, which places a premium on the wants of each individual, and rejects the concept of others imposing their standards upon us.

Sometimes, our childrens' push back may cause us to give in, so as not to anger them. We may think that we need to give in to their demands so that they will "like us." Unfortunately, this has become a prevalent phenomenon, where parents try to be their kids' friends.

But we must remember that our job is to be our child's parents, not to be their friends. Despite the push back

First Israel, then Sinai

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Our historic entry into the land of Hashem can't be a muted or low-key event. A river crossing of this historical magnitude must be marked by a rite of passage, or by some iconic ceremony which can properly frame this epic pilgrimage.

The obvious choice for an inaugural ceremony, is a re-dramatization of the grand events of Har Sinai. Though the Torah was delivered in a sandy desert, and is universal, it was specifically designated for inhabitants of Israel. As we entered Israel, the full sweep of mitzvot became operative, lending Sinai its total resonance. It makes sense to restage Har Sinai, as we cross the Jordan river into Israel.

Furthermore, our warrant to this contested land was forged at Sinai, as we embraced the will of Hashem. Absent of the Sinai covenant, we have no license to the land of Israel. For all these reasons, Har Sinai was redramatized upon the twin peaks of Gerizim and Eival. Proclaiming fundamental mitzvot and elementary prohibitions at these two mountains was reminiscent of the ten commandments broadcast at Sinai.

First Sinai, then Israel

So it was during our first passage to Israel, and so it was hundreds of years later, when we returned from our first exile. After repeated efforts to return to Israel, Ezra and

our kids give us, deep down they understand that these rules are put in place because we care. Of course, we must be thoughtful about the rules we put in place, and when possible, involve our kids in our decisions by creating meaningful discussion surrounding the rules we establish. But we should never make the mistake of thinking that establishing rules is itself problematic.

I heard many times from Dr. David Pelcovitz that the key to parenting is the two "I"'s – love and limits. As we see from this week's parsha, one manifestation of Hashem being our father is the fact that He demands that we act in a certain way, and places limitations on what we are allowed to do. In doing so, He shows fundamental concern for us, and how we act in this world. We, too, show deep love for our children when we create expectations and set limits for them. While they might fight us on the rules, deep down they know that we set them because we care for them.

Nechemiah finally led forty-two thousand Jews back home. On the first Rosh Hashanah after their return, the entire nation assembled for a public Torah recital in the streets of Yerushalayim. Tears streamed down the cheeks of older people who had been exiled from Yerushalayim just seventy years earlier. Sometimes redemption stretches over millennia, while other times, it occurs in a flash. It is hard to predict.

Every time we enter Israel, we must revisit those seminal moments at Sinai, when a human community first accepted the word of God. One day, when our current redemption concludes, we will, once again, restage the Sinai drama. Jewish history is fueled by Sinai, and every surge into Israel must be propelled by that mountain.

Location is everything

Why, though, was such an iconic ceremony situated in such a peculiar location? Shouldn't this transformational ceremony be conducted immediately upon entry into the land? If the embrace of Torah is a necessary precondition for settling Israel, shouldn't it occur sooner?

Yehoshua did build a stone monument in the Gilgal region immediately after crossing the Jordan river, but the full Sinai re-dramatization was delayed until they journeyed west, to Shechem.

To be sure, there were topographical complications delaying the Sinai ceremony, as the Jordan river region is a level valley without notable mountains upon which to restage Sinai. However, if the Jordan flatlands weren't suited for a mountain ceremony, there is a nearby mountain range which is perfectly suited to host a Sinai sequel. Why not schedule this ceremony upon the hilltops of Yerushalayim and upon the Har Habayit? Why travel all the way to Shechem and postpone this iconic moment?

An Ancient journey

The people currently entering Israel were not the first travelers to walk through Shechem on their way to "greater Israel". Hundreds of years earlier, Avraham had journeyed to Israel, arriving in the north from his former hometown, in modern-day Syria and Iraq. One of the first places he camps is Elon Moreh near Shechem- עד אלון מורה עד שכם . By voyaging to Shechem for our inaugural ceremony, we were, effectively, retracing the founding steps of Avraham.

Israel was originally awarded to great visionaries who discovered Hashem in a dark world of confusion and mayhem. Unfortunately, History wasn't ready for an immediate Jewish settlement, causing a four-generation delay, and a miserable detour through the darkness of Egypt.

The time had finally come to claim this ancient land, but the living recipients of Israel had never "met" their founding fathers, to whom the land was originally gifted. Four hundred years of slavery had severed them from their heritage, reducing these great pioneers to ancient unknown personalities. To this new generation, the great heroes of Breishit were just storybook characters. By traveling north to Shechem, and retracing the pioneering steps of their grandfather Avraham, they blended history and heritage.

A land of a thousand dreams

Our generation has begun the final return home. The struggle to claim Israel has produced modern heroes who have ignited our redemptive imagination, and others, who have navigated us home. Sometimes the modern struggle is so demanding though, that it obscures past "heritage heroes" of Israel. Our claim to this land didn't begin in 1948. We are living the dreams and hopes of thousands of generations. As we craft a modern state, with a robust

democracy and a formidable military, we mustn't ignore past generations whose dreams floated to this land for centuries. From Avraham to the dreamers of the 19th century, millions longed for the land we casually stroll through. As we build this land we must "retrace" their steps and their dreams.

First Israel, then Sinai

Scheduling the mini-Sinai upon Gerizim and Eival isn't just a "scheme" to redirect the nation to Shechem. The Torah deliberately guides us upon a considerable "journey" אחרי אחר - to a region which requires a voyage after we cross into Israel. Evidently and ironically, the Torah prefers that the mini-Sinai be conducted after they have traversed a 'derech' of Israel.

Torah is, indeed, a prerequisite for settling Israel, but not everyone may be immediately prepared to accept its entirety. Much has transpired since those heady days at our mountain rendezvous with Hashem. The desert journey was long, tedious and plagued by constant rebellion. Perhaps not everyone who entered Israel fully identified with the expectations of Sinai. What can condition them toward greater religious commitment?

Living in the land Israel, under the shadow of divine care and supervision is meant to advance the entire nation to Sinai readiness. Breathing the air of this magical land, observing the divine miracles, and living in the land of history, rebuilds broken Jewish spirit, advancing us to a Sinai "state of mind". First Israel, then Sinai.

We have returned from our own long journey through the wastelands of history, but this journey has exacted a heavy toll. Sadly, once again, many Jews are not yet ready for a renewed Sinai covenant. Once again, the Sinai moment is being delayed to give our people a chance to catch their breath, process the past two-thousand years, and rebuild our spirit. There is no better way to rebuild Jewish identity than to live in the land of Israel. This reconstruction of Jewish pride and spirit may not always manifest itself in religious expression, but one day it will. It may take a few generations, but our final Sinai moment will occur. It is just being delayed, as it was then.

What happened before will happen again.

A Parsha Lesson for Chodesh Elul

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Re'eh, Moshe Rabbeinu's soliloquy to the nation continues. The parsha begins with the following stirring words:

ראה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה, *See I place before you today blessing and curse*; אֶת־הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹת; ה' - *the blessing, that you will listen to the commandments of Hashem your G-d that I command you today*; וְהַקְּלָלָה אִם־לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ אֶל־מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם, *and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of Hashem your G-d, and you turn from the path that I am commanding you today to go after the gods of others that you did not know* (Devarim 11:26-28).

The Ibn Ezra comments: ראה. לכל אחד ידבר. - "See I place before you today blessing and curse: Moshe speaks to each and every individual."

Every person is a unique individual, Moshe tells us, and each of us has a choice in life. Moshe is speaking to each and every person in each and every generation. He reminds us that we can choose the path of Torah, mitzvos, and chessed, which is the path of blessing and eternal life, or we can choose the other way, R"L. If we choose the former, Hashem will shower His blessing upon us, and if we choose the latter, the curses will come.

Rabbi Zelig Pliskin teaches an important mussar lesson from the opening verses of Parshas Re'eh. R' Pliskin writes, "On the first word of the parsha, the Ibn Ezra comments: 'He (Moshe) is talking to each one individually.'"

"Although Moshe was speaking to the entire Jewish people, he started off in the singular to tell everyone that they should listen to what he had to say as if he were speaking to him (or her) alone."

We learn a great lesson from here, R' Pliskin notes. "When someone is delivering a lecture or giving a class, it is easy to think, 'Oh, the speaker is speaking to someone else! He is speaking to everyone else who is here! I don't have to take what he says seriously since he is not really directing his words to me.' But this is an error. The way to grow from lectures (shiurim) and Torah classes is to view the words of the speaker as if they were directed only to you! Try it out. The next time you are in an audience listening to the inspiring words of the lecturer, tell yourself: 'The speaker has me in mind. Let me see how I can utilize what he says for my own self-improvement' (Growth Through Torah, p.413).

Instead of thinking of how the speaker's words and message can help your friend improve, think of how it can help you improve!

Rabbi Zev Leff shlita (Rav of Moshav Mattityahu) teaches this very lesson with a proof from Sefer Bereishis.

Upon the birth of Kayin and Hevel, animosity and jealousy grew between the first brothers. While G-d turned to Hevel and his offering, He did not turn to Kayin and his offering. Seeing Kayin's jealousy and fallen face, Hashem came to Kayin and gave him, what Rabbi Leff calls, "the world's first mussar shmooze." And Hashem said to Kayin: הֲלוֹא אָם־, תִּיטִיב, שְׂאֵת, וְאִם לֹא תִיטִיב, לְפָתַח חֲטָאת רִיבְךָ; וְאֵלֶיךָ, תִּשׁוּקְתּוֹ וְאֶתָּה, תִּיטִיב־בוֹ? - *Is it not so that if you improve, you will be lifted up? And if you do not improve, sin crouches at the entrance, and to you is its longing, but you can rule over it!* (Bereishis 4:6-7).

Kayin does not reply or answer G-d. And the very next pasuk, seemingly out of place, records: וַיֹּאמֶר קַיִן אֶל־הֶבֶל אָחִיו - *and Kayin said to Hevel his brother. And it was when they were in the field, and Kayin got up to Hevel his brother and he killed him* (v.8).

What did Kayin say to Hevel when they were in the field!? The Torah does not tell us. But he surely told him something before he killed him; the pasuk records that Kayin did indeed say something to Hevel.

Rabbi Leff teaches that the pshat of the pasukim comes to teach us something very important. Hashem just gave Kayin a mussar shmooze, the first inspirational lecture delivered by HKB"H Himself! "Why are you upset Kayin? If you improve you will be lifted up! Work on yourself to be better and your life will change for the better!"

And what did Kayin say to himself? Wow! What a great lecture! My brother, Hevel, he is the one who really needs to hear this! - *and Kayin said to Hevel his brother, while they were in the field:* you better hear this mussar Hashem just said - it's definitely relevant for you and your life!" And when Hevel did not apply it to his life (for G-d was actually speaking to Kayin), his brother rose up and killed him.

It's so easy in life to forward the blame to others. It's so easy to see the faults and weaknesses in others and see perfection in ourselves. It's so easy to hear even a shmooze from the greatest prophet of all, Moshe Rabbeinu, and think "Wow, does my friend ever need to hear this!"

Re'eh - "See I place before YOU today the blessing and the curse". Notes the Ibn Ezra, Moshe was speaking to each and every yachid (individual). We must take the inspiration to our own hearts, for our own selves, and work on improving ourselves.

What an apropos lesson for Chodesh Elul, the final

In God We Trust?

Rabbi Jared Anstandig

Of all the various mitzvot and transgressions described in Parashat Re'eh, some of the most difficult ones to understand are those involving idolatry. In this week's parshah we learn of three particular cases of idolatry: a false prophet calling the people to worship foreign gods (Devarim 13:23), a nonprophet seducing others to commit idolatry (13:78), and an entire city lusting after idols (13:1314). It is difficult to wrap our head around each of these cases.

For example, Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, in Ha'amek Davar, is perplexed by how any of the above scenarios could even come to be. He asks (Devarim 13:2), "Regarding the entire section, how is it possible that a prophet will come and say that God's will is to do something that is explicitly prohibited in the Ten Commandments?!"

In his answer, Rabbi Berlin explains that, indeed, converting the people to idolatry would be a difficult sell under normal circumstances. Therefore, it must be that there was some plague or disaster that made the people think that an alternative form of worship was necessary to save their lives.

This answer is understandable for the times of Tanach, when idolatry was rampant in the region. So much exposure to that world could weaken anyone's resolve in times of great need. But in the year 2022 the idea that we would turn to idolatry, under any circumstances, seems unlikely. In fact, the Gemara testifies that our desires for idolatry are no longer what they once were, describing that during the times of Nechemiah, the people fasted and prayed for three days until their desire for idolatry was lifted from them. (Sanhedrin 64a) It would seem from this passage that the desire for idolatry today is dramatically less than what existed earlier.

And yet, even though there is no longer the same desire to worship images, perhaps idolatry still exists. A 15th century Spanish sage, Rabbi Yitzchak Arama,

month of the year and a time of introspection and repentance. The path back to the RS"O is when each and every person understands that Hashem, the Torah, and our teachers are speaking to *me*. And when I use that as impetus for change, then b'ezrat Hashem each and every one of us will merit repentance, renewal and a shana tova u'mesuka!

writes in Akeidat Yitzchak that today we are still strongly drawn to a form of idolatry. In his discussion of the Ten Commandments in Sefer Shemot, he writes (Shemot 20), "Included within the prohibition against worshipping foreign gods is [a ban on] the thoughts and actions of amassing wealth, which becomes for them like a mighty god." Writing some 500 years ago, Rabbi Arama realized that even if we are not bowing to an idol, we may be bowing to wealth. Idolatry today is when our priority isn't in God and doing God's will, but in acquiring as much as we can, even at the expense of doing God's will.

A Talmudic passage (Ketuvot 68a) brings the same point. There, the Talmud quotes Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah who connects worshipping idols to refusing to give tzedakah. The Torah (Devarim 15:9) refers to a person who hides his or her eyes from a needy individual as a *beliya'al* (literally, a base or useless individual). The only other time the Torah uses this term is in Devarim 13:14, when referring to an individual who entices the members of his or her city to worship idols. Noting this linguistic connection, Rabbi Yehoshua ben Korchah argues that one who hides from the opportunity to donate to the needy, preferring instead to hold onto his or her own money, is comparable to one who worships idols.

In his commentary to that verse, Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch explains that this is far more than a linguistic connection. He writes, "To ignore such a request [for financial assistance] is equivalent to denying God and idolizing money." By refusing to donate to the poor, this individual is essentially turning his or her wealth into an almighty idol.

According to these sources, the desire for idolatry is unfortunately alive and well in our time. Not with actual idols, but with the prioritization of money and wealth. May we recognize this in our lives, and may we see that our most important goal is not the acquisition of wealth, but the performance of God's will in this world.

We Need Fins and Scales

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

In Parshas Re'ei (14:3-21), Moshe reiterates the Torah's dietary code, listing the creatures which are permissible and forbidden for consumption. Several *mefarshim* explain that different creatures are associated with different characteristics, and so the Torah forbade eating certain species, as ingesting them would cause us to absorb their negative qualities. Thus, for example, the Ramban writes that the species of birds which the Torah forbids us to consume are all birds of prey, and eating them could make us aggressive and violent.

With this in mind, let us briefly examine the properties of kosher fish. The Torah requires that a species of fish is permissible for consumption if it has both fins and scales (14:9-10). The Gemara in Maseches Chulin (66b) states that any species which has scales also has fins, but a species with fins does not necessarily have scales. This gives rise to the obvious question of why the Torah found it necessary to specify both properties; seemingly, it would have sufficed for the Torah to establish that a fish needs scales in order to be considered kosher, because if a species has scales, then it must also have fins. The Gemara poses this question, and it answers, ולהגדיל תורה ולהאדירה – the Torah went through the trouble of specifying both fins and scales “to increase Torah and to glorify it.”

At first glance, this might mean simply that the Torah added more information for us to learn and thereby earn reward. Indeed, nothing is added by mentioning also fins, but the Torah did so nonetheless so that we will have more Torah to learn.

Alternatively, however, this might mean that we have important lessons to learn from this quality of kosher fish – that they have both fins and scales. The Torah wanted to not only inform us of what properties make a species kosher, but also impart to us the message underlying these two properties, and so it specified both the fins and the scales.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe, following this approach, offered a beautiful explanation for the significance of the fins and scales. Rabbi Akiva (Berachos 61b) famously compared *Am Yisrael* to fish, explaining that we need Torah

the way fish need water. Accordingly, the Rebbe added, we may assume that we, like kosher fish, must “swim” through Torah with both fins and scales. The fins enable a fish to swim, to move about, to explore new horizons, to travel vast distances and spread throughout the earth. By contrast, the scales protect a fish's body from harm. Correspondingly, the Rebbe taught, a Jew must maintain a delicate balance between integration and self-protection. On the hand, we must use our “fins” to “swim about,” to get involved, to engage with the world, to meet people, to go out into the world and make the greatest contribution we can make. But at the same time, we must recognize that as we “swim,” dangers lurk. We must protect ourselves against negative influences and lures.

The Rebbe said that if a Jew has just one and not the other, then he is not “kosher.” A Jew who lives without “fins,” who looks only inward, focusing on his own *avodas Hashem* without seeking ways to make an impact, is not “kosher.” Conversely, a Jew who gets involved, who moves about, who extends outward, and integrates into society, but without protective “scales,” without setting up appropriate boundaries to resist negative influences, likewise cannot be considered “kosher.” This is the delicate balance that we must maintain – integrating in order to have an impact, but while ensuring to protect ourselves from spiritual harm.¹

I would humbly add that the “fins” also symbolize the need to “swim upstream,” to go against popular trends. Several species of fish, such as salmon, swim against the stream with the force of their fins. We, too, are required on occasion to uphold an unpopular opinion or act differently than most of the people around us. This could be difficult and uncomfortable, but we must learn from the fish and use our “fins,” our strength and conviction, to go against popular trends for the sake of maintaining our loyalty to the Torah.

¹ Former Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rav Yisrael Meir Lau, observed that this timeless message of the Rebbe is manifest in the lives of the devoted Lubavitch *sheluchim*, who “swim” to remote regions to spread the beauty of *Yiddishkeit*, but do so with a very strong sense of religious identity, and an uncompromising devotion to their beliefs and principles.

Identifying a True Prophet

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Re'eh, the Torah warns the Jewish people not to follow false prophets. The difficulty with this admonition is that it is not at all easy to identify who truly speaks in the name of G-d, and who is a charlatan.

In Deuteronomy 13:2, the Torah declares: כִּי יָקוּם בְּקִרְבְּךָ נְבִיא אוֹ חֹלֵם הַלּוֹם, וְנָתַן אֵלָיךְ אוֹת אוֹ מוֹפֵת. If a prophet or a dreamer of a dream arises in your midst and produces a sign or a wonder, and the sign or wonder comes true. And the prophet then says: "Let us follow other gods" that you did not know, and attempts to persuade you to worship them. The Torah boldly proclaims, Deuteronomy 13:4-6: It is forbidden to listen to the words of this prophet or dreamer, for G-d is testing the Jewish people to know whether they love G-d with all their hearts and with all their souls. That prophet or dreamer, the Torah pronounces, shall be put to death, for he has spoken perversion against G-d.

The Torah, later in parashat Shoftim, Deuteronomy 18:21, actually anticipates how difficult it is to identify a true prophet: וְכִי תֹאמַר בְּלִבְבְּךָ, אֵיכָה נִדְעֵ אֶת הַדְּבָר אֲשֶׁר לֹא דְבָרוֹ, הֲשֵׁם, And, should you ask yourselves, how shall we know that the prophecy was not spoken by G-d? The way to know, says the Torah, is to see whether the future bears out the prophet's own words. If the prophecy comes true, he is an authentic prophet (provided, of course, that he does not prophecy anything directly contrary to any of the rules of the Torah). If the prophecy does not come true, then the prophet is false.

Of course, in reality, identifying a true or a false prophet is not nearly so clear. After all, the Torah warns, that even false prophets can make predictions that come true and, that occasionally, even the message of a true prophet is not fulfilled (especially when circumstances change). Because of this ambiguity, at times, the good sense of the people and their leaders must be relied on to verify the truthfulness of the prophet.

Jewish tradition suggests a number of reasons to explain how false prophets could perform signs and render prophecy at all.

1. The false prophet may have originally been a true prophet who has defected, like Hananiah ben Azzur (Jeremiah 28, Sanhedrin 90a).

2. The false prophet may merely be imitating the true

prophet and "misappropriating" his words. (R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, Deuteronomy 13:2)

3. There are people who are capable, on the basis of natural observation, of making accurate predictions. In ancient times predicting an eclipse of the sun could have an immense impact on the people.

4. Tradition acknowledges that there may be some people who have clairvoyant powers, and yet do not qualify as prophets. (Rashbam, Deuteronomy 13:2)

The challenge of identifying true prophecy, is one that the Jewish people have faced for the past 2000 years of Christian history, and has resulted in much hatred and Jewish bloodshed. The "loaded" question, from the Jewish perspective, is whether Jesus qualifies as a true prophet.

Trude Weiss-Rosmarin addresses this question brilliantly in her seminal book *Judaism and Christianity: The Differences* (Jonathan David, 1943). She maintains that Jesus definitely does not qualify as a true prophet for many reasons, among them, the following:

1. Jewish prophets are not the "mouthpiece of G-d." True prophets of Israel never taught in their own name, they always taught in the name of G-d. Jesus, however, taught on his own authority, frequently in opposition to the rabbinic teachings of the time. Maimonides summarizes this requirement by saying "a prophet must not add or diminish any of the Torah commandments."

2. Jesus arrogated for himself the power of forgiving sins which Judaism reserves for G-d alone.

3. Jesus declares miracles on his own authority, declaring them to be a sign of his own power and his own strength. The gospels record that Jesus once turned five loaves of bread and two fish into food sufficient for 5,000 men and what was left over filled twelve baskets (Luke 9:13-17). When performing this miracle, Jesus made no reference whatsoever to G-d, using it simply as a proof of his own powers.

4. Jesus performed miracles to make the people believe in him. Traditional Jewish prophets perform miracles to strengthen the people's belief in G-d.

5. Jesus' teachings do not measure up to the prophetic standards. He dismissed many important points of Jewish law, once again, violating the prohibition of adding or diminishing from the Torah.

6. While Judaism is essentially moderate and accepting,

Jesus was a profound ascetic. Consequently, his teachings were principally concerned with the World to Come. This is powerfully indicated by Jesus' hostile attitude toward marriage and family.

7. Judaism encourages the pious to assume prominent places in society, as good sons, husbands, brothers and neighbors. Jesus demanded of his followers to hate their nearest and dearest. So, they may be better and more loyal disciples.

8. Jesus taught that if a person is assaulted on his right cheek, he should turn the other, too. Judaism teaches that if someone comes to kill you, you may preempt and kill the would-be murderer. Jewish law does not command that one love his adversary, for this would be unnatural. It does however command to refrain from exacting vengeance upon an enemy and to assist the enemy in an emergency, for this is to be expected of an ethical human being.

9. The bible regards all humans as brothers because of their common Father in Heaven. The messages of the Hebrew prophets were universal messages that G-d intended for all of humankind, not merely the Jews. Jesus emphasizes that he was sent only to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24).

10. Although Jesus pledged that not one dot of an "i" or crossing of a "t" should be dropped from the law, he himself disregarded and violated a number of important laws, including instructing his disciples to collect wheat on Shabbat because they were hungry.

11. While Jewish law recommends divorce as a means of terminating an unhappy and untenable marriage, Jesus, in clear opposition to the Bible and the Talmud prohibited divorce, except in the instance of adultery.

12. Contrary to hallowed Jewish tradition, Jesus decries the religious value of communal prayer and idealizes solitary devotion.

We see from this analysis that the question of identifying a true prophet is not merely a theoretical construct. Even in the 21st century, this question has vital implications for our people. So, it is with many of the precepts of the Torah that seem to be purely hypothetical and without any practical implications.

Perhaps we should learn from parashat Re'eh and the issue of identifying a true prophet, that all moral and theological issues require intensive study and investigation, and that none of the Torah principles should be treated lightly or summarily dismissed.