

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

As a prelude to holding us to a higher standard than the rest of the nations, we are told that we are G-d's children (Devarim 14:1). However, since G-d had already sent a message to Pharaoh telling him that "Israel is my first-born son" (Shemos 4:22), so he better let them go, being characterized as G-d's children seems like a step down. As the Chizkuni paraphrases G-d's words, "all of the nations are my children, but Israel is more precious to me than all of them, and they are the firstborn." In other words, being "G-d's children" is not unique to the Jewish nation. Why, then, is being told that we are G-d's children included in the explanation for our additional requirements?

The Talmud (Kiddushin 36a) records a dispute between Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Mayer. Rabbi Yehudah says that we are only considered G-d's children when we are following G-d's will, while Rabbi Mayer says that we are considered G-d's children no matter what. To prove his point, Rabbi Mayer brings several verses that refer to the Jewish people as G-d's children even when we are sinning. Which leaves us questioning Rabbi Yehudah's position on two fronts. How can he say that we are not called G-d's children when we are sinning if there are numerous verses that say explicitly that we are? Also, if, as we saw above, all of humanity is considered to be G-d's children, how can the Jewish people ever be considered not to be G-d's children? The other nations aren't fulfilling G-d's will, yet are considered His children. Why aren't we also considered G-d's children even when we don't keep the Torah?

After bringing Rabbi Mayer's opinion that the Jewish people are considered G-d's children whether they are fulfilling His will or not, the Midrash Hagadol (Devarim 14:1) has Rabbi Mayer adding that there is a difference, for "when they are fulfilling G-d's will He attributes His name to them (lit. on them) and calls them His children, as it says, 'you are children to Hashem your G-d' (our verse). The Midrash then continues (see also the alternate version of Avos d'Rav Noson 44) by telling us that not only are we called G-d's children, but so are G-d's administering angels (quoting Iyov 1:6). It concludes by saying, "I wouldn't know which are more cherished (Israel or the angels),

so the Torah tells us, 'so says G-d: Israel is my first-born son.'"

We can glean several things from the Midrash Hagadol. First of all, even though Rabbi Mayer is of the opinion that we are always called G-d's children, he agrees with Rabbi Yehudah that our verse only applies when we are fulfilling G-d's will. This extra level of G-d attributing His name to us, which I understand to mean being known as G-d's people (and is accompanied by G-d's divine presence resting upon us) is above and beyond being considered G-d's children, or even His first-born. Therefore, even though all nations are considered to be G-d's children, when we fulfill G-d's will we become more closely associated with Him. (This could answer our first question according to Rabbi Mayer, but not according to Rabbi Yehudah.)

We also see that when G-d called us His first-born son, he wasn't necessarily contrasting us with the other nations. If G-d's intent was to tell Pharaoh that even though the administering angels are His children we are His first-born, the message becomes more consistent with the overall theme of making Egypt (and the whole world) aware that G-d is involved with this world (see Shemos 9:18 and Ramban on 13:16). To paraphrase G-d's words in a manner similar to the way the Chizkuni did, "don't think that I am only involved with spiritual beings, for the Nation of Israel are also my children, and in fact are more precious, as they are my firstborn." It would follow that this status of being more precious than the angels only applies when we are fulfilling G-d's will.

These two approaches to understanding G-d calling Israel His first-born are not mutually exclusive. On the one hand, all the nations are his physical children, created in His image, and we are his firstborn. On the other hand, the angels are His spiritual children, created to do His bidding. We have the opportunity to also be considered His spiritual children, when we join the spiritual ranks by fulfilling His will. And when we do so, we are more cherished than the angels (who are not faced with the challenges we are to become spiritual), and are therefore considered His first-born.

I would like to suggest that Rabbi Yehudah and Rabbi Mayer are discussing which kind of "children" our verse is referring to. Rabbi Yehudah agrees with Rabbi Mayer that we are always considered His children, as the verses Rabbi Mayer quoted indicate. But that refers to being his *physical* children. Our verse is telling us

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that we are so special because we can be considered *spiritual* children as well. However, this is only true when we are fulfilling G-d's will. Rabbi Mayer, on the other hand, says that our verse is talking about being considered his physical children. Upon hearing Rabbi Yehudah (in Kiddushin) quote our verse to mean that we are only considered His children when we are fulfilling His will, Rabbi Mayer felt compelled to say that we are always considered His physical children (as indicated by the verses he quoted). Nevertheless, when we are fulfilling His will, we take it to the next level, with G-d attributing His name to us, even in this physical world.

We are G-d's children, and represent Him in this world. Therefore, we are held to a higher standard. We are also a holy nation, capable of being considered more precious than the angels. As such, we have additional requirements above and beyond those of his other children in the physical world. © 2007 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

This week's Torah portion gives us a curious mitzvah. It tells us not to add or subtract to the commandments. (Deuteronomy 13:1) This seems to go against the idea of the ongoing development of Jewish law on the part of the rabbis. (See Deuteronomy 17:8-13)

Consider, for example, one of the dietary laws. The Torah states that one may not eat meat and milk together. The rabbis take this prohibition, and extend it to include the consumption of fowl and milk. Does this extension violate the prohibition of adding to the Torah?

Rambam (Maimonides) feels that this in fact may be the case. He codifies that if one maintains that fowl and milk are enjoined by Torah law, this extension is a violation of adding to the Torah. However, if the rabbis declared that as an added precaution, because of the similarity between fowl and animal food, that fowl together with milk is rabbinically forbidden-including fowl as a rabbinic prohibition is perfectly legitimate. (Laws of Mamrim 2:9)

This idea helps explain a well known midrashic comment on the Garden of Eden narrative. According to the text of the Torah, Eve tells the serpent that G-d

had commanded that the tree of knowledge not be touched. Eve, however, adds to the decree. As the Midrash explains, G-d had only forbidden eating, not touching. The serpent then pushed Eve against the tree, declaring, "as you have not died from touching it, so you will not die from eating thereof." In the words of Rashi: "She added to the command (of G-d), therefore, she was led to diminish from it." (Rashi, Genesis 3:3,4)

One could argue that Eve acted properly, after all, she, like the rabbis, only tried to protect G-d's commandment by extending the prohibition to touching. Her mistake, however, was saying that G-d had actually issued such a command. She should have declared that while G-d forbade the eating from the tree, as a precaution, as a "fence" around the law, she decided not to touch it as well.

Thus, rabbinic law is pivotal. Still, it is important to understand which laws are rabbinic and which are biblical in nature.

One final note: Separate from rabbinic legislation and interpretation is the halakhic realm of humra. Humra is imposing a very stringent observance of the law. While stringency can elevate spirituality, it is essential to know when a practice falls into the category of humra and when it does not. Failure to make this distinction can often lead to the humra becoming the only accepted practice. This can be dangerous because it can lead to a lack of understanding and intolerance of the sometimes wide range of practices within a certain rabbinic law.

So, rabbis can extend the laws when there is a critical need, but they must do so with a realization of their responsibility not to blur the lines set out in the Torah. Throughout the ages rabbis have done so with the hope that their interpretations and legislations bring people closer to G-d and to one another. © 2007 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The key word in this week's parsha is naturally the word that begins the parsha - re'eih. The word means "see!" in the imperative, immediate sense. It is plain to understand that Moshe somehow needs the Jewish people to understand that it is insufficient to understand intellectually or even believe emotionally in G-d's role in our lives. One must be able to see it clearly, to identify and quantify it in daily living.

The Talmud in one of its magnificent metaphors describes the scene in Heaven where the righteous encircle G-d, so to speak, and point at the Divine Presence itself, seeing it, so to speak, in clarity and acuity. At the miracle of the splitting of the Red Sea, the Jews also pointed their finger at the Divine

Presence that was saving them from Pharaoh's hordes and stated: "This is my G-d." There are times in one's individual existence and certainly in Jewish historical experience that G-d can be "seen," so to speak, in our world. But in order to see one has to look and one has to focus.

It is insufficient merely to peek or glance. For true sight demands a degree of concentration, of appreciation of detail, of recognizing depth, color and shape. And that is where the idea of ritual and commandments takes center stage in Jewish life and worldview. The commandments of the Torah are meant to be our corrective lens in order to "see" things properly. Some people have better physical eyesight than others. The same can be said for the important aspect of spiritual eyesight as well.

There are people who suffer from not being able to see things from afar. They are so locked into seeing the trees that they are almost unaware of the forest that those trees constitute. Knowing the minutiae of the commandments is important, necessary and praiseworthy. But seeing the underlying values and principles of Judaism is also important, necessary and praiseworthy. There are people who feel that they are far-sighted but who trip over the objects that are immediately in front of them.

By ignoring observance of the commandments and possessing only "Jewish values" the likelihood of sin is greatly increased. G-d told Kayin that "at the open door [as one only steps out of one's home] sin crouches in wait" to ensnare us. Thus in order to be able to "see" things correctly and clearly in Jewish life one cannot be near-sighted nor far-sighted. One has to have balanced and near perfect vision. In a world where such good eyesight is rare there are many physical and medical procedures that advertise the restoration of perfect sight.

Moshe himself, so to speak, advertises such a product in today's parsha reading. It is the understanding of the necessary studying and observance of the commandments combined with a deeper appreciation of true Jewish values that are the corrective lenses that can help restore our balanced and focused vision of Jewish and general life. In truth, Judaism subscribes to the aphorism that seeing is believing. © 2007 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

Besides the obvious material advantages the West offers its citizens, a select number of Jews of Western persuasion has created an ideology out of continuing to live in the Diaspora. They maintain a

glorification of the exile based on the notion that living marginally, on the edge of history, allows one to remain aloof from the ugly aspects of society.

So long as Jews are powerless and stateless, (which is what the Jewish position in Christian/Western culture boils down to when the past 2,000 years are taken as a whole), the Jewish people cannot be accused of the cruelties and immoralities other nations have committed wholesale. Sitting on the sidelines, we don't trample the innocent.

And so Israel, a small country with all kinds of problems, looms on the international horizon as an undesirable trouble spot, forced to deal with thorny moral questions: How to punish terrorists who've been convicted of brutal murders that haven't distinguished between children and soldiers? How to fight a war against katyusha rockets launched from within civilian populations aimed at nothing but the civilian populations in Jewish border towns? How to release terrorists with blood on their hands for captured Israeli soldiers? How to make peace with masked Arab gangs whose guns are often aimed at their fellow Arabs? How to maintain a humanitarian stance towards an enemy whose fanatic hatred begins with mother's milk and doesn't end until the seventy virgins embrace the suicide bomber?

For the ideologues of non-involvement it would seem that the image preferred is the Jew as scholar, rabbi, poet and doctor - the quiet soul, who never raises his voice and therefore doesn't have to risk getting his hands dirtied by the complex business of running a country surrounded by enemies.

In this week's portion, Re'eh, Jews are commanded to kill other Jews if the overwhelming population of a city worships idolatry, a concept which sounds utterly primitive to a modern sensitivity. How can G-d command us to kill a Jewish city? True, we're dealing with idolaters, but we're still dealing with an entire city consisting of men, women and children. The idea is so shocking that it's easy to miss the end of the verse, that "...G-d will then grant you to be merciful." (Deut. 13:18) What is mercy doing in the heart of such apparent cruelty?

Rabbi Akiva suggests that the very words "G-d will then grant you to be merciful" means that you are not to kill the children (Tosefta Sanhedrin Chapter 14). However, there are three Talmudic passages which see this passage as a confirmation of compassion, as a fundamental characteristic of the Jewish People:

Tractate Shabbat, 151b - "It is taught: Rabban Gamliel B'Rebi says, 'He will grant you to be merciful, and He will be merciful to you,' teaches that all who are merciful to others are accorded mercy by heaven and all who are not merciful are not accorded mercy by heaven...'"

Tractate Betza, 32b - "It is taught: [our verse followed by...] All who are merciful to others are

assuredly of the seed of our father Abraham, and all who are not merciful are assuredly not of the seed of...Abraham."

Tractate Yevamot, 79a - "It is taught: There are three distinguishing signs of the Jewish nation: mercifulness, shamefacedness, and loving-kindness. Mercifulness, as it is written..." and then the quote from our verse in Deuteronomy 13.

What's going on here? A Jewish law of physics; as you do unto others so it will be done unto you? That for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction? A Jewish law of heredity and genetics for identifying Abraham's seed? A third law of social anthropology in terms of distinguishing Jewish behavior? Why all this from a verse in a passage concerning idolatry and decimation? The tension between aspects of mercy and the horrible facts of annihilation is a total shock, so jolting that the reader staggers away in confusion.

The Ohr HaHayim, (Rabbi Haim ben Attar, 1696-1743), pierces through this question by examining what happens to people when they kill. The actual executions may very well lead to a state of blood lust among the killers capable of undoing the very heart of Jewish civilization. By including the verse concerning mercy, the Torah promises that compassion will not be uprooted from the Jews, even if normal peoples would ordinarily be changed by the violence. G-d's promise is a gift: Jews will not become cruel.

In this light, the Talmudic passages we've quoted reverberate even deeper. Who and what we are as a people - seed of Abraham, loving-kindness, compassionate etc. - not only accompany us in the best of circumstances, but even during the worst. Hope-fully, the Torah is presenting a self-fulfilling prophecy: Get your hands dirty, if you must, in the business of establishing a state, but don't forget your fundamental quality of mercy.

Every day in Israel we see the relevance of the Or HaHayim's interpretation. In the war between us and the Palestinians, we are being called upon to do things which are "cruel" in order to protect our innocent civilians, constantly targeted by our enemy. But how many other armies have devoted so much energy toward inventing bullets which maim, but don't kill? Bursting into a house suspected of hiding a cache of weapons may frighten people, but how many armed forces perform such actions with the avowed purpose of not killing the innocent, even at risk to themselves. We do not aerially bomb an entire area we know contain caches of weapons ready to be used against us, we rather go searching house to house, and only target would-be assassins, even if this means risking the lives of our own boys.

During the two intifadas - and even today-the impossible has taken place. In every Jewish hospital in Israel, Arabs - even Palestinians who were wounded

with their hands still clutching their loaded gun-are given the same excellent medical attention as the Israelis. And I recall an amazing event which could take place only in Israel. An Israeli Jew was murdered by a terrorist Gazan during the second intifada. In the midst of their tragedy, the family opted to donate his heart for a transplant. The next person in line for a heart was a Palestinian from East Jerusalem. The family agonized and decided to give the heart, never the less.

If we think about it, this Jewish heart may have been foreshadowed in the verse about compassion appearing in this week's portion. Cruelty will not become second nature to us. It's a promise. The Jews will never lose their compassionate hearts. Even in the midst of necessary violence, "G-d will grant you to be merciful." © 2007 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI ADAM LIEBERMAN

A Life Lesson

In this week's Torah portion, Moses tells the Jewish people additional commandments they need to follow. And then he implores upon them to: "...do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d." (Deuteronomy 12:28)

It seems rather obvious for Moses, the leader of the Jewish people, to tell his followers to do what is right in the eyes of G-d. But this really isn't as much of a rhetorical statement as one might think.

We live in a society where we care enormously about what other people think about us. Whether you're aware of it or not, the things you say, the clothes you wear, and the places you shop are influenced largely by the perception you want to give to others. This is precisely why in public we might act one way towards someone, but in private - outside the watchful eyes of those we so much want to impress - we will act in a completely different way.

When Moses told the Jews to do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d, he was teaching us all a life-changing insight: G-d is everywhere. He's right next to you as you're reading this. And He "follows" you when you walk to your car, and He sits right next to you at work. There isn't a cubic foot of space in which G-d is not completely and totally present and aware of everything this is being said and done. Remember, when it comes to G-d's presence, there's no such thing as privacy. G-d is always right there.

In New York City's Time Square there exists a massive television screen called the JumboTron. Thousands of people - some as far as 20 city blocks away - can see whatever images are displayed on this screen. What if you lived your life as though it was being shown live on the JumboTron? How much different would you act if everything you did was being broadcast in real-time on this giant screen? But that's exactly the powerful message that G-d's teaching us. We are on this screen and G-d is observing everything.

So instead of doing what looks right in the eyes of your co-workers and friends, listen to the words of Moses. Concern yourself with impressing the One who truly wants you to become great and strive to do what is good and right in the eyes of G-d. © 2007 Rabbi A. Lieberman & aish.org

RABBI ZEV LEFF

Parsha Insights

“Grant truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham, as you swore to our forefathers from ancient times.”(Micha 7:20)

In the first, second, fourth, and fifth years of the seven-year Shmitah cycle, Jews living in Israel were commanded to separate a tenth of their crops and bring them to Jerusalem to eat (ma'aser sheni). In the third and six years of the cycle, that tenth was given to the poor as ma'aser ani.

At first glance, it would seem that the order of ma'aser sheni and ma'aser ani should have been reversed. Why were the landowners not required to first share with the poor and only subsequently to enjoy their produce in Jerusalem. In other words, why was ma'aser ani not given at the beginning of the three-year cycle, and only then ma'aser sheni?

Maimonides (Gifts to the Poor 10:2) writes that one must give tzedakah with a joyous countenance, and that giving with a disgruntled mien negates the mitzvah. Thus we see that the attitude with which one gives tzedakah is intrinsic to the mitzvah itself.

The prophet Michah (5:17) defines that which G-d wants from us as "to do justice, love chesed (kindness), and walk modestly with G-d." And in the concluding blessing of the Amidah we thank G-d for giving us, "through the light of His countenance a Torah of life and a love of chesed." It is not enough to do chesed. One must love chesed.

More than any other positive mitzvah, writes Maimonides, tzedakah is a sign of the essence of a Jew. It is the very fiber of Jewish existence and the source of our future redemption. Similarly, a good heart, which is the basis of all good character traits (Avot 2:13), refers to an attitude which fosters chesed.

The goal of our striving in this world is the perfection of our souls. The mitzvot are the means to achieving this goal. There are two mitzvot which enable us to emulate G-d as He relates to us. One is Torah study. Through the study of Torah we attach ourselves to G-d's mind, as it were, as He created the world.

The second is chesed. The basis of all existence is G-d's desire to do chesed to His creation. Hence, when we do acts of chesed with a strong desire, we follow in G-d's footsteps.

Abraham discovered G-d through the characteristic of chesed of recognizing the chesed inherent in the creation. He so longed to perform acts of chesed, that even when he sat in great agony after his

own brit milah, he suffered when no guests appeared. Our mother Rivka, too, was distinguished by her love of chesed. It was for that quality alone that Eliezer tested her.

We are now prepared to understand the order of ma'aser sheni and ma'aser ani. By commanding us to bring one-tenth of our crops to Jerusalem to rejoice there, G-d taught us two vital lessons. The first is that our material possessions are a present from G-d and He can dictate how we use that material bounty. The second is that using material wealth in the way prescribed by G-d generates feelings of joy and sanctity.

Once we have internalized these lessons in the first two years of the cycle, we can offer that bounty to the poor in the third year - not perfunctorily, but with a true love of chesed.

The letters of Elul hint to the verse, "I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me," signifying our intensified relationship with G-d leading up to the High Holidays. To achieve this we must condition ourselves not only to do chesed, but to love it. © 2007 Rabbi Z. Leff & aish.org

RABBI BARUCH LEFF

If Dogs Could Talk

Would you rather be blind or deaf? G-d forbid it should ever happen, but let's say you had to make a choice between having your sense of sight be removed or your sense of hearing. Which of the two would you rather have? An idea from this week's Parsha weighs in on this question.

The very first verse (Devarim 11:26) states: "SEE, I have placed before you today, blessings and curses." Did G-d place anything tangible and visible before them? No, G-d was describing intellectual concepts of blessings and curses. So what did He mean when He said, "See"?

Obviously, the word "see" is used here to refer to a comprehension. We use "see" in reference to an understanding of something as in, "Do you see what I'm telling you?" because sight is our most reliable and strongest sense. (See Radak in Zechariah 1:9.)

In order to explain this idea, let's take a dog and his sense of smell as an example. Since a dog's most reliable and strongest sense is that of smell, if he could speak and wanted to convey his grasp of an idea, he would say, "I smell it! Now I understand what you mean."

If sight is our strongest sense and is therefore the reason why our Parsha begins with that word, we are led to some questions. First, there are times the Torah uses the word "hear" to refer to understanding. For example, "Hear, Israel, G-d, Our Lord, G-d is One." Why wouldn't the Torah always use the word "see" in allusion to internalizing a comprehension of something if it is our most reliable sense?

In addition, if sight is our strongest sense, one should be more seriously liable for blinding someone than for deafening a person. Yet, the Talmud Baba Kama 85b, rules that if you deafen someone you must pay much more than if you blinded him. The opposite should be the case!

In order to answer both of these questions, we must introduce another factor into the equation beyond the issue of strongest and most reliable sense. That issue is communication with others.

Helen Keller once said, "If you would ask me: if I could have one of my senses back, either sight or hearing, which would I choose? I would choose hearing. Being blind cuts you off from the world but being deaf cuts you off from relating and communicating with people. I choose people over the world."

Hearing is more valuable when it comes to paying damages because losing the ability to relate and share with others is a more serious deprivation. Sight may be our strongest sense but human relationships and communication is more vital to human existence.

The Torah wishes to convey different and specific messages when it chooses to use either "see" or "hear" to mean an understanding of something. When the Torah uses the word "shema," "hear," the indication is that we are to make a commitment which involves our intellect.

"Re'eh," - to see - means we are to make a commitment that involves our emotions. To "hear" requires a greater and deeper understanding, and to "see" requires a greater reaction to an understanding that is already present.

"Hearing" requires a greater and deeper understanding because when we are able to hear someone we are able to truly communicate well with them. (As significant as sign language is for the hearing impaired, it can't fully replace the highest and deepest levels of communication between people that is experienced through hearing.) "Sight" is used to garner our emotions to a great reaction for an understanding that we already have because sight is our strongest and most reliable sense. Seeing really is believing and I can commit to something much more easily when I see it rather than if I only hear it.

This explains a most fascinating difference in phraseology between the Zohar and the Talmud. Very often, when the Talmud presents new information and facts, the introductory phrase, "Come and hear," in Aramaic "Ta Shema," is used. When the Zohar presents new information, the introductory phrase, "Come and see," "Yuh chazi," is utilized. Why the difference?

According to what we have discussed, it becomes clear. Talmud includes all of the revealed, rational Torah, which is known as "nigleh," revealed. This section of Torah entails great and profound logical

thought, and understanding of the intellect. This is why "hearing" is most necessary since "hearing" achieves clear communication on a rational plain.

Zohar is the chief work of Jewish mysticism and goes beyond the realm of rationale and logic to the world of the supernatural and the hidden. It is "nistar," the concealed Torah. "Seeing" is the sense that can rouse our emotions to a great reaction and the Zohar's main function is to strengthen our passions and emotions for our soul and spirit. This is why Rabbi Avraham Yeshaya Karelitz (circa 1940, known as the Chazon Ish) would say that when learning Zohar one experiences the sweetness of our Father in Heaven.

In the first verse in Parshat Re'eh, "see" is most appropriate based on the subject matter. G-d is describing a ceremony of oaths for the observance of the Torah that involve blessings and curses. This ceremony wouldn't take place until much later, after the Jews would cross the Jordan River into Israel. Why then does G-d say, "See, I have placed before you TODAY, blessings and curses"? The blessings and curses were not being placed before them right now, so why say "today"?

There IS something that is taking place today. G-d is transmitting the knowledge and awareness that there will be a ceremony of blessings and curses. This event requires a tremendous amount of preparation and the Jewish people need to be made aware of this way in advance - "today." "Today" is meant for them to internalize and make a commitment that involves their emotions to prepare for the awesome event of the blessings and curses. It is not something to be dealt with in the distant future. It is to be reckoned with and prepared for now - today.

See what I'm saying? © 2007 Rabbi B. Leff & aish.org

RABBI ABBA WAGENSBERG

The Mind's Eye

In the opening verse of this week's parsha, Moses speaks to the Jewish people and says, "See (re'eh), I have set before you today a blessing and a curse" (Deut. 11:26). The word "re'eh" seems out of place here. Moses is not showing anything to the people; he is merely informing them about the consequences of their actions! Why does the Torah present this information in terms of "seeing," when it would have made more sense to use the idea of "hearing"?

Later in the parsha, the verse instructs us "to do what is good and upright in the eyes of G-d" (Deut. 12:28). Rashi (quoting the Midrash Sifri) divides this verse into two parts: the word "good" (tov) refers to doing good in the eyes of G-d, whereas the word "upright" (yashar) refers to acting righteously in the eyes of other people. This is a very puzzling comment. Since the verse itself links both of these qualities ("good" and "upright") to G-d, how can the Midrash

claim that the word "upright" refers to other people? This seems contrary to the literal meaning of the text!

A passage in the Talmud (Brachot 28b) will help us resolve both difficulties: The students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai came to visit him when he was on his deathbed. They gathered around their teacher and requested a blessing. Rabbi Yochanan replied, "May it be G-d's will that your fear of Heaven be as great as your fear of people." This unusual blessing surprised the students: "Is that all?" they exclaimed. It would seem that a person's fear of G-d should be even greater than his fear of people! Rabbi Yochanan responded: "You should know that when a person commits a crime, his first thought is always, 'Did anybody see me?'"

This Talmudic passage provides an insight into the Midrash's division of the verse in Parshat Re'eh. The Torah counsels, "Do what is good and upright in the eyes of G-d." But how are we to know what is "good" in G-d's eyes? The seemingly superfluous word "upright" is included in the verse to teach us the following lesson. We do what is good in the eyes of G-d by imagining what our conduct would be if we were in the presence of important people. Acting righteously, with other people in mind, is a prerequisite to pleasing to the Divine. This interpretation does not contradict the literal meaning of the verse; rather, it teaches us an approach we must take in our daily lives to help ensure that we are doing what is "good in G-d's eyes."

Now we can understand the use of the word "re'eh" in terms of this idea. The Talmud teaches, "Who is wise? One who sees the future" (Tamid 32a). It is interesting that the Talmud does not attribute wisdom to one who knows the future. Instead, the word "see" is used. This teaches us an important lesson. A person who knows what will happen may not change his behavior - but a person who vividly sees, with his mind's eye, the potential outcome of his actions, may choose to act differently.

(We all know that our time on earth is finite, yet this knowledge of our own mortality rarely spurs us to make positive changes in our lives. However, if we were to see, in our imagination, the actual moment of our death, that frightening vision of stretchers and paramedics would make us aware of our true priorities far more powerfully than mere knowledge!)

This is why Moses uses the word "re'eh" in addressing the Jewish people. Moses does not want the people simply to listen to his words - he wants them to vividly imagine the results of obeying or disobeying them.

May we all be blessed with a dynamic imagination that will lead us to an awareness of G-d's Presence. May we use our vision to truly see the ramifications of our action, speech and thought so that we can live our lives according to what is good and

upright in G-d's eyes. © 2007 Rabbi A. Wagensberg & aish.org

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

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In this week's Torah portion, Moshe repeats to Bnei Yisrael the passage about which living things may not be eaten, a passage which first appeared in Chapter 11 of Vayikra. However, there is an important difference between the two lists. In Vayikra, the Torah concentrates on the prohibited animals, while in Devarim the permitted animals are also listed. For example, with respect to animals on the land, the Torah in Vayikra first gives the rules by which an animal is to be considered kosher: "Every animal with a split hoof, with the hoof completely separated, and which chews its cud among the animals, you can eat" [11:3]. But it then immediately continues with a list of the forbidden animals, noting in detail the reason why each one is prohibited. "But do not eat the following from among those who chew their cud and whose hoof is split: The camel, because it chews its cud but does not have a split hoof... The hare, because it chews its cud but does not have a split hoof... The rabbit, because it chews its cud but does not have a split hoof... The pig, since it has a split hoof with the hoof completely separated, but it does not chew its cud" [11:4-7].

In this week's Torah portion, on the other hand, the passage begins with a list of permitted animals. "These are the animals which you may eat: An ox, a sheep, and a goat. An ayal and a deer..." [Devarim 14:4-5]. Only then is the general rule given: "Every animal that has a hoof split into two, with the hoof completely split, one that chews its cud among the animals, this may be eaten." [14:6]. There is then a list of unkosher animals, but it is much shorter than the earlier list. "But do not eat these from among those who chew their cud and who have completely split hoofs: The camel, the hare, and the rabbit, for they chew their cuds but do not have split hoofs. They are therefore impure for you." [14:7]. The same general approach is also true for birds. In this week's portion it is written, "You may eat every pure bird" [14:11], while no similar expression appears at all in Vayikra. What is the reason for these differences?

Evidently the two passages represent different approaches about prohibited foods. In Vayikra, as we have noted in the past, the list of animals which may not be eaten appears within a section of the Torah that deals with ritual purity and impurity. The list even ends with the declaration, "To distinguish between the impure and the pure, and between the animal which can be eaten and the animal which cannot" [Vayikra 11:47]. In this week's portion, on the other hand, the list appears in a part of the Torah that is concerned with holiness. Note that it begins and ends with the

statement, "You are a holy nation for your G-d" [Devarim 14:2,21].

This difference is very significant. The natural status of everything in the world is to be ritually pure while at the same time it is profane and not holy. Thus, ritual impurity is a negative departure from the natural state. Forbidden animals, which are considered an abomination, lead to impurity, and therefore the first passage emphasizes their existence. Holiness, on the other hand, is a positive deviation from the natural state. Therefore, the emphasis in this week's portion, insisting that Bnei Yisrael should be holy, requires them to eat pure food. Only after this fact has been established is it necessary to note that eating abominable foods will harm the sanctity of the people.

RABBI SHLOMO KATZ

Hama'ayan

Our parashah opens, "See, I put before you today a blessing and a curse. That blessing: when you hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, that I command you today. And the curse: if you do not hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your G-d..." We read similarly in Parashat Nitzavim (30:15), "See, I have placed before you today the life and the good, and the death and the evil." The midrash Yalkut Shimoni comments: "Lest a Jew say, 'Since Hashem has placed two paths before me, a way of life and a way of death, I may choose whichever I wish,' therefore the Torah says (30:19), 'You shall choose life'."

R' Yitzchak Eliyahu Landau z"l (1781-1876; Vilna) explains: In man's mundane affairs, if one person (call him "Reuven") instructs another person ("Shimon") to do something for Shimon's own benefit, Reuven will not punish Shimon for failing to do that thing. The only loss that Shimon will suffer because of his failure is that he will not obtain the promised benefit. One might think, therefore, that when Hashem gives us a choice between good and bad and between life and death, He does not care which we choose. If we perform the mitzvot we will be rewarded, and if we don't perform the mitzvot, we will not be punished. (So one might think.)

Says the Torah: "You shall choose life." The reason Hashem created the world was to share His Goodness, and if we do not choose life, we frustrate His very goal in creating us. Therefore, we are commanded to choose life, and we will be held accountable if we do not. (Patsheggen Ha'ketav: Divrei Chachamim)

"You are children to Hashem your G-d." (14:1)

The story is told of a "paritz"/gentile landowner who was ill. Hearing that the Ba'al Shem Tov z"l (died 1760) could cure all sorts of illnesses, he visited the Ba'al Shem Tov and begged the Ba'al Shem Tov to cure him of his ills. The Ba'al Shem Tov told him that

the root of his troubles was his excessive pursuit of physical gratification, so the "paritz" asked: "What do you do to defeat the type of urges that are troubling me?"

The Ba'al Shem Tov answered, "I am an old man and I do not suffer from such urges."

Later, the Ba'al Shem Tov's grandson, R' Baruch of Medzibozh z"l, asked the Ba'al Shem Tov why he did not answer that he does not succumb to excessive urges because he is Jewish and the Torah prohibits such behavior. The Ba'al Shem Tov answered, "It is impossible to explain to a gentile what it means to be Jewish."

When retelling this story in later years, R' Baruch would add, "My grandfather said that it is impossible to explain to a gentile what it means to be Jewish. I say that it is also impossible to put into words for a fellow Jew what it means to be Jewish." What does this mean?

R' Shalom Noach Brazovsky shlita (the "Slonimer Rebbe") explains R' Baruch's statement in light of our verse. We are called "children to Hashem." Rabbi Meir says in the gemara that even when we sin, we are Hashem's children. This is a very lofty level, one that we ourselves cannot really appreciate or understand.

If a Jew had any inkling of his own holiness, he could never sin. R' Avraham z"l, the first "Slonimer Rebbe", said about this: Mishlei says (3:11), "The mussar / reproof of Hashem, My son, 'al timas'/do not despise." This may be interpreted as follows: "What is Hashem's mussar? It is the knowledge that 'You are My son!' Therefore, do not make yourself despicable by acting in a way that is not befitting a son of the king." The most searing mussar that a thinking Jew can hear is that he is a child of Hashem and must act in a way befitting his status. (Netivot Shalom: Kuntreis "Bechochmah Yivneh Bayit," p. 7)

A related thought: We read in Shir Hashirim (5:9-10): "With what does your beloved excel...? My beloved is pure and red." The midrash explains that the gentile nations ask the Jews, "What is so special about your G-d?"

The Jews answer: "My G-d is pure. He is mine alone, and He redeemed me from Egypt and from other exiles."

R' Avraham Yoffen z"l (Novardok Rosh Yeshiva; died 1970) asks: Presumably every nation, even an idolatrous one, considers its own G-d to be as special and unique as we consider Hashem to be. If so, what is the import of the answer that we give the gentile nations? The emphasis in our answer, says R' Yoffen, is on the fact that Hashem is "mine alone." We have a relationship with Him which cannot be explained in words. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Arzei Halevanon II p. 393) © 2000 Rabbi S. Katz & Project Genesis, Inc.