

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Making a series of programmes for the BBC on morality in the twenty-first century, I felt I had to travel to Toronto to have a conversation with a man I had not met before, Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson. Recently he has recently become an iconic intellectual for millions of young people, as well as a figure of caricature and abuse by others who should know better.¹ The vast popularity of his podcasts – hours long and formidably intellectual – suggests that he has been saying something that many people feel a need to hear and are not adequately hearing from other contemporary voices.

During our conversation there was a moment of searing intensity. Peterson was talking about his daughter Mikhaila. At the age of six, she was found to be suffering from severe polyarticular juvenile idiopathic arthritis. Thirty-seven of her joints were affected. During her childhood and teen years, she had to have a hip replacement, then an ankle replacement. She was in acute, incessant pain. Describing her ordeal, Peterson's voice was wavering on the verge of tears. Then he said:

One of the things we were very careful about and talked with her a lot about was to not allow herself to regard herself as a victim. And man, she had reason to regard herself as a victim ... [but] as soon as you see yourself as a victim ... that breeds thoughts of anger and revenge – and that takes you to a place that's psychologically as terrible as the physiological place. And to her great credit I would say this is part of what allowed her to emerge from this because she did eventually figure out what was wrong with her, and by all appearances fix it by about 90%. It's unstable but it's way better because of the fact that she didn't allow herself to become existentially enraged by her condition ... People have every reason to construe themselves as victims. Their lives are characterised by suffering and betrayal. Those are ineradicable experiences. [The question is] what's the right attitude to take to that –

¹ The fact that he has been accused of being an anti-Semite makes me deeply ashamed of those who said this. There is enough real antisemitism in the world today for us to focus on the real thing, and not portray as an enemy a man who is a friend.

anger or rejection, resentment, hostility, murderousness? That's the story of Cain and Abel, [and] that's not good. That leads to Hell.

As soon as I heard those words I understood what had led me to this man, because much of my life has been driven by the same search, though it came about in a different way. It happened because of the Holocaust survivors I came to know. They really were victims of one of the worst crimes against humanity in all of history. Yet they did not see themselves as victims. The survivors I knew, with almost superhuman courage, looked forward, built a new life for themselves, supported one another emotionally, and then, many years later, told their story, not for the sake of revisiting the past but for the sake of educating today's young people on the importance of taking responsibility for a more human and humane future.

But how is this possible? How can you be a victim and yet not see yourself as a victim without being guilty of denial, or deliberate forgetfulness, or wishful thinking?

The answer is that uniquely – this is what makes us Homo sapiens – in any given situation we can look back or we can look forward. We can ask: "Why did this happen?" That involves looking back for some cause in the past. Or we can ask, "What then shall I do?" This involves looking forward, trying to work out some future destination given that this is our starting point.

There is a massive difference between the two. I can't change the past. But I can change the future. Looking back, I see myself as an object acted on by forces largely beyond my control. Looking forward, I see myself as a subject, a choosing moral agent, deciding which path to take from here to where I want eventually to be.

Both are legitimate ways of thinking, but one leads to resentment, bitterness, rage and a desire for revenge. The other leads to challenge, courage, strength of will and self-control. That for me is what Mikhaila Peterson and the Holocaust survivors



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represent: the triumph of choice over fate.

Jordan Peterson came to his philosophy through his own and his father's battles with depression and his daughter's battle with her physical condition. Jews came to it through the life-changing teachings of Moses, especially in the book of Deuteronomy. They are epitomised in the opening verses of our parsha.

See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you heed the commandments of the Lord your God that I am giving you today; and the curse, if you do not heed the commandments of the Lord your God, but stray from the way I am commanding you today ... (Deut. 11:26-28)

Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses keeps saying: don't think your future will be determined by forces outside your control. You are indeed surrounded by forces outside your control, but what matters is how you choose. Everything else will follow from that. Choose the good and good things will happen to you. Choose the bad, and eventually you will suffer. Bad choices create bad people who create bad societies, and in such societies, in the fullness of time, liberty is lost. I cannot make that choice for you.

The choice, he says again and again, is yours alone: you as an individual, second person singular, and you as a people, second person plural. The result was that remarkably, Jews did not see themselves as victims. A key figure here, centuries after Moses, was Jeremiah. Jeremiah kept warning the people that the strength of a country does not depend on the strength of its army but on the strength of its society. Is there justice? Is there compassion? Are people concerned about the welfare of others or only about their own? Is there corruption in high places?

Do religious leaders overlook the moral failings of their people, believing that all you have to do is perform the Temple rituals and all will be well: God will save us from our enemies? Jeremiah kept saying, in so many words, that God will not save us from our enemies until we save ourselves from our own lesser selves.

When disaster came – the destruction of the Temple – Jeremiah made one of the most important assertions in all history. He did not see the Babylonian

conquest as the defeat of Israel and its God. He saw it as the defeat of Israel by its God. And this proved to be the salvaging of hope. God is still there, he was saying. Return to Him and He will return to you. Don't define yourself as a victim of the Babylonians. Define yourself as a free moral agent, capable of choosing a better future.

Jews paid an enormous psychological price for seeing history the way they did. "Because of our sins we were exiled from our land," we say repeatedly in our prayers. We refuse to define ourselves as the victims of anyone else, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, fate, the inexorability of history, original sin, unconscious drives, blind evolution, genetic determinism or the inevitable consequences of the struggle for power. We blame ourselves: "Because of our sins."

That is a heavy burden of guilt, unbearable were it not for our faith in Divine forgiveness. But the alternative is heavier still, namely, to define ourselves as victims, asking not, "What did we do wrong?" but "Who did this to us?"

"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse." That was Moses' insistent message in the last month of his life. There is always a choice. As Viktor Frankl said, even in Auschwitz there was one freedom they could not take away from us: the freedom to choose how to respond. Victimhood focuses us on a past we can't change. Choice focuses us on a future we can change, liberating us from being held captive by our resentments, and summoning us to what Emmanuel Levinas called *Difficile Liberte*, "difficult freedom."

There really are victims in this world, and none of us should minimise their experiences. But in most cases (admittedly, not all) the most important thing we can do is help them recover their sense of agency. This is never easy, but is essential if they are not to drown in their own learned helplessness. No one should ever blame a victim. But neither should any of us encourage a victim to stay a victim. It took immense courage for Mikhaila Peterson and the Holocaust survivors to rise above their victimhood, but what a victory they won for human freedom, dignity and responsibility.

Hence the life changing idea: Never define yourself as a victim. You cannot change your past but you can change your future. There is always a choice, and by exercising the strength to choose, we can rise above fate. *Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2018 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org*

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

"You shall smite, yes smite, all of the inhabitants of that city by the sword...and you shall burn entirely with fire the city and all of its spoils to

the Lord your God, and it shall be an everlasting desolation (tel); it shall not be rebuilt again” (Deut 13: 16,17). The Bible ordains the destruction of an entire city which has been seduced and deceived into practicing idolatry. And, although many sages of the Talmud maintain that such a situation “never was and was never created” (B.T. Sanhedrin), the harsh words nevertheless sear our souls.

What is even more difficult to understand are the concluding words of the Bible regarding this idolatrous and hapless city: “[And the Lord] shall give you compassion, and He shall be compassionate towards you, and He shall cause you to increase as he has sworn to your forbearers. ... This is because you have hearkened to the voice of the Lord your God to observe all of His commandments... to do what is righteous (hayashar) in the eyes of the Lord your God” (13:18,19).

Compassion? Righteousness? Are these fitting words to describe such an extreme punishment?

To understand the simple meaning of the Biblical command, it is necessary to explore the actual meaning – and nature of the offense – of idolatry.

The Bible lashes out against idolatry more than any other transgression, and of the fourteen verses that comprise the Decalogue, four of them focus on idolatrous worship, its evils constantly reiterated.

Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, in their penetrating study *Idolatry*, cite various commentaries as to why idolatry is presented as so repulsive in the Bible. For Maimonides the sin of idolatry is theological; for the Meiri it was the number of innocent children sacrificed to Moloch, the eating of flesh cruelly torn from living animals, and the wanton sexual orgies associated with the Dionysian rites which so incensed the Lord. Indeed, the Bible seems to support the Meiri position; to give but two examples: “You shall not bow down to their gods and you shall not serve them; you shall not act in accordance with their deeds (Exodus 23:24)... “You shall destroy, yes destroy [the seven indigenous nations of Canaan]lest they teach you to do all the abominations which they do before their gods (Deut. 20:17,18).”

The Bible never understood monotheism in terms of faith alone; from the very beginning of God’s election of Abraham who was commanded to convey to subsequent generations not only belief in one God, but rather in a God “...whose path it is to do compassionate righteousness and justice” (Gen. 18:19), belief in ethical monotheism. Moses asks for a glimpse into the Divine (Ex. 32:18). The Almighty, after explaining that no mortal being can ever truly understand the Ineffable and the Infinite, does grant a partial glimpse: “The Lord, the Lord, is a God of Compassion (rahum) and freely-giving love, long-suffering, full of lovingkindness, and truth ...” (Ex. 34:6. Even Maimonides suggests that these descriptions,

known as the 13 Attributes of the Divine, are not so much theological as anthropological, to teach us mortals –commanded to imitate God– precisely how to do so: just as He is Compassionate, you humans must be compassionate, just as He gives love freely, so must you humans...

Hence, the essence of Judaism is not proper intellectual understanding of the Divine, (which is impossible), but rather proper human imitation of the Divine traits, acting towards other human beings the way God would have us act, in compassionately righteous and just ways. And so Maimonides concludes his *Guide for the Perplexed*, written at the end of his life, with a citation from Jeremiah: “Thus says the Lord: But only in this should one glory if he wishes to glory: Learn about and come to know Me. I am the Lord who does lovingkindness, justice and righteous compassion on earth. Only in these do I delight, says the Lord” (Jeremiah 9:22,23).

From this perspective, only a religion which teaches love of every human being, which demands a system of righteousness and morality, and which preaches a world of peace, can take its rightful place as a religion of ethical monotheism. Islam, for example, has enriched the world with architectural and decorative breakthroughs, glorious poetry, mathematical genius, and philosophical writings influenced by Aristotle. And certainly the Kalami and Sufi interpretations of the Koran, which present jihad as a spiritual struggle, place Islam alongside Judaism and Christianity as a worthy vehicle and noble model for ethical monotheism. Tragically, however, the Jihadism, spawned from Saudi Arabia’s brand of Wahhabi Islam, the Al-Qaeda culture of homicide-bomber terrorism wreaking worldwide fear and destruction -from Manhattan to Bali- and threatening anyone who is not a Jihad believing Muslim, is the antithesis of ethical monotheism.

George Weigel, a Catholic theologian and distinguished Senior Fellow at the Ethical and Public Policy Center in Washington D.C., cites a definition of Jihadism in his compelling study, *Faith, Reason and the War against Jihadism*: “It is the religiously inspired ideology which teaches that it is the moral obligation of Muslims to employ whatever means are necessary to compel the world’s submission to Islam.” He also analyzes the theology of Sayyid Qutb (d.1966), who stresses the fact that God’s one-ness demands universal fealty, that the very existence of a non-Muslim constitutes a threat to the success of Islam and therefore of God, and so such an individual must be converted or killed; other religions and modern secularism are not merely mistaken but are evil, “filth to be expunged.” The goal is Global Jihad. Such a perverted “theology” only transmutes true Sufi Moslem monotheism into hateful Wahabi mono-Satanism. The enemy of the free world is not Islam; but it is Jihadism.

Let me return to our Biblical passage regarding

the idolatrous city. An army hell-bent upon the destruction of innocent people, whose only sin is to believe differently than they do, enters the category of "...the one who is coming to kill you must be first killed by you." One cannot love the good without hating the evil, 'good' defined as the protection of the innocent and 'evil' as the destruction of the innocent. The only justification for taking a life is in order to protect innocent lives – when taking a life is not only permitted but mandatory. Hence the Bible refers to the destruction of the murderous inhabitants of such a city as an act committed for the sake of righteousness. Just imagine the world today if the United States had not committed its forces to help fight Nazi Germany!

But even the most justified of wars wreaks havoc, collateral damage can never be completely prevented, and the soul of one who takes even a guilty human life must become in some way injured to the inestimable value of human life. Hence some of our Sages determine that such a city's destruction had never been decreed, that the Bible is speaking in theory only. Certainly all other possibilities must be exhausted before taking such a final step of destroying a city.

Nevertheless, the Biblical account – well aware of the moral and ethical ambiguities involved – guarantees that those who fight rank evil will not thereby lose their inner sense of compassion for the suffering of innocent individuals or their overarching reverence for life. To the contrary, he who is compassionate towards those perpetrating cruelty will end up being cruel towards those who are compassionate. ©2018 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

There are many things in life that appear to be simple and logical to one person and yet remain beyond the understanding of one's companion, friend or acquaintance. To our great teacher Moshe, someone who is blessed with the immense powers of prophecy and who is spiritually able to communicate with Heaven almost at will, the mission of life and of the Jewish people is simple and visible to all. It is to obey and treasure the laws and values that are represented in the Torah as elucidated and explained by Moshe to the entire congregation of Israel.

All these rules and values are, in his opinion, self-evident and visible to all. The choices that are presented to the people are stark and clear. They are between life and death, eternity and passing trends. It is all so simple to the prophetic eyes of Moshe. Part of his frustration with the Jewish people is their inability to see things as he sees them and to understand the challenges of life and history, as he perceives them.

Oftentimes geniuses are not necessarily the best of teachers because they cannot understand why

the students are so dense and do not understand what is so patently obvious. The Torah reading this week, and the entire book of D'varim as spoken and taught by Moshe, is an expression of this frustration of the great and the holy, who see the obvious but are unable to make others see it easily as well.

The Jewish people, who heard the words of Moshe over three millennia ago in the desert of Sinai, had to appreciate and believe his message because of their faith in him and in the experiences of Godly revelation that they had witnessed and in which they had participated. They had to believe in the future that had not yet arrived and had to make their choices based on faith in that future alone.

In our time, well over 3000 years later, we need not rely solely on the prophetic advice and the words of Moshe, but rather we have the benefit of thousands of years of experience and history. We can look back and correctly assess the choices made by the Jewish people over all these millennia of its existence. We can judge which decisions were wise and which were foolish, which led to survival and eternity and which led to destruction.

Because of this ability to read and know our history, one would think that we could choose wisely based on facts and experiences that are self-evident and obvious to serious students of our past. Yet, the Jewish people have a propensity to make bad choices and to ignore the clear lessons of our history.

Therefore, the statement of Moshe that we should see clearly even today the choices that face us and the decisions that we perforce are bound to make, our past should teach us in which direction these decisions should go and what pitfalls we should avoid. ©2018 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

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 God had commanded that the tree of knowledge not be touched. Eve, however, adds to the decree. As the Midrash explains, God 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 God), 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 God's commandment by extending the prohibition to touching. Her mistake, however, was saying that God had actually issued such a command. She should have declared that while God 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 halakic 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 God and to one another. ©2018 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 MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Joy of Shlepping

This week the Torah teaches us the laws of ma'aser sheni. Ma'aser sheni constitutes a tithe in which the apportioned produce is consumed by the owner. It is not necessarily distributed to the poor or the Levite like other tithes. However, there is one requirement. The entire tithe must be eaten in

Jerusalem. That being the case, the owner of 10,000 bushels would have to haul 1,000 bushels to Jerusalem to be eaten. That may be quite a difficult task. So the Torah has a way out.

"And if the road will be too long, because you will not be able to carry it (the produce) as the place where Hashem chose to rest His name is far from you(r home) -- then you may exchange (the produce) for money. You shall take the money instead to Jerusalem and spend it on, cattle, flocks, wine or other alcoholic beverages whatever your heart desires and eat it before Hashem (in Jerusalem) and rejoice with your family" (Deuteronomy 14:24-26).

Thus the Torah teaches us that the owner can redeem the produce through money and spend the money on any food items in Jerusalem, avoiding an arduous chore of shipping the food to Jerusalem. The money will help stimulate the economy of the Holy City, thus establishing a protocol that has lasted centuries -- supporting the merchants of Jerusalem.

Yet if you analyze the actual wording in the Torah you will notice something strange. The Torah does not say, "if you will not be able to carry it because the road will be too long, then you can redeem the fruit with money." The Torah seems to reverse the cause and effect. It tells us that "if the road will be too long, because you will not be able to carry it..." (Deuteronomy 14:24). It seems that the Torah is saying that the road is long because you cannot carry it. Isn't the opposite true? If the road is long, it is not because you cannot schlep, you cannot schlep because the road is long. Why did the Torah reverse the phrase? Perhaps the Torah is telling us a subtle message.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein once met an affluent Jew whose father came to these shores long before laws were passed to guarantee that a person could remain Shabbos-observant in the workforce. The man's father went from job to job, having been told not to report on Monday if he would not come to work on Saturday. The old man was persistent and never desecrated the Shabbos. Yet his son was not observant at all.

Reb Moshe asked him point blank. "Why is it that your father kept the mitzvos with great sacrifice, but you did not follow in his footsteps?"

The businessman answered with complete honesty. "It's true that Pop did not miss a Shabbos or even a prayer. But before he did a mitzvah he would give a krechitz and declare, 'Oy! Iz shver tzu zain a frummer yid (It is terribly hard to be an observant Jew!)' After years of hearing my dad complain, I decided that the burden would be too much for me to bear. I decided never to permit myself to attempt those difficulties and I gave up religious observance."

After hearing this story, I thought, homiletically, that perhaps the Torah is telling us an important message in the psyche of mitzvah observance. "The

road will be too long, because will not be able to carry it." No one says the road is too long because of sheer distance. It is too long because you do not want to carry the load. If one, however, carries his package with joy then the road is not a long one. If one decides that he is carrying a heavy burden, then the road, no matter the distance, will always be too long.

Rabbi Feinstein commented that no matter how difficult a mitzvah seems, if one observes it with a smile, with joy and with pleasure, he will be able to carry the mitzvah for long distances. He will not only carry it a long distance himself, he will carry it for generations to come. ©2018 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI DAVID S. LEVIN

The Source of Charity

The Torah discusses the concept of the Sh'mittah, the seventh year during which the land is laid fallow and the B'nei Yisrael were dependent on the abundance of crop which Hashem had provided them during the sixth planting year. The Torah then switches its focus from the Sh'mittah year to the concept of Tzedakah, Charity. Moshe discusses with the people their communal responsibility to provide assistance to those who cannot provide for themselves. This connection between the Sh'mittah and Tzedakah is an important one which we shall explore.

The Torah tells us, "If there shall be a destitute person among you, of one of your brothers in any of your cities, in your land that Hashem your Elokim gives to you, you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand against your destitute brother. But you shall surely open your hand to him and you shall surely grant him enough for his lack which is lacking for him. Beware lest there be a lawless thought in your heart, saying the seventh year approaches the year of Sh'mittah and you will look malevolently upon your destitute brother and you will not give him, then he will call out against you to Hashem and there will be a sin upon you. You shall surely give to him and let your heart not feel bad when you give him for because of this matter Hashem, your Elokim will bless you in all your deeds and in your every undertaking. For destitute people will not cease to exist within the land therefore I command you saying. 'You shall surely open your hand to your brother, to your poor one, to your destitute in your land.'"

HaRav Shamshon Raphael Hirsch explains that there is a contradiction between the message that is given here and the choice of person in the verbs. "'If there shall be a destitute person among you', can only be said with any decisiveness to a community.... 'You shall not harden your heart', and also the following sayings, according to the whole choice of the words used, are directed primarily to the individual. So that here the Torah has the community and the individual

simultaneously in mind. The duty of caring and providing for the poor accordingly rests both on the community and equally on every single member of it." The Kli Yakar explains that this sense of responsibility stems partly from our dependence on Hashem for all of our needs. Accordingly, he advises that no prayer to Hashem should be offered without first putting a coin in the box for Tzedakah, charity.

HaRav Zalman Sorotzkin explains that tzedakah is a two-part action done with the *leiv* and the *yad*, the heart and the hand. Our eyes see a destitute person and our hearts immediately turn to see how we can help him. There exists a moment between the time we accept the responsibility of helping and when our hands proceed to accomplish that which our hearts have pledged. That is the reason for listing the openness of the heart before the openness of the hand. On Rosh Hashanah we say Hashem chooses who will become rich and who will become poor. We might mistakenly argue that Hashem has made a judgment on these poor and this is their rightful place. Who are we then to alter that judgment by giving from ourselves to alleviate Hashem's decree? The laws of tzedakah direct us against this approach.

The Ramban points out a possible contradiction in the text: Moshe told the B'nei Yisrael previously that there would cease to be anyone whose needs were not met, yet here he speaks of, "destitute people will not cease to exist within the land." Ramban explains that a condition was placed on the ideal: the B'nei Yisrael must observe all the laws of the Torah. Moshe understood that some would falter, and there would still be the punishment of poverty within the land. This seems to place a direct correlation between observing the mitzvot of Hashem and receiving wealth or poverty. Yet we know that this contradicts statements within the Gemara concerning a righteous man who has bad things happen to him and is poor. Our Rabbis explain that this is a person who is being tested by Hashem in order to reward him in the future.

It is interesting that the Torah ties the idea of Tzedakah to the Sh'mittah year. For one full year the land is "returned" to Hashem and there would be no income from the land. The Torah warns us, "Beware lest there be a lawless thought in your heart, saying the seventh year approaches the year of Sh'mittah and you will look malevolently upon your poor brother and you will not give him...." The Torah is concerned for the poor person before the Sh'mittah year when everyone else is worried about survival. The Torah is concerned with the effect that Sh'mittah has on loaning money, Sh'mittah k'safim, for in the Sh'mittah year all loans that have been given before Sh'mittah are forgiven and are no longer in effect. Immediately prior to the Sh'mittah year a person might be unwilling to lend money to a desolate person for fear that the debt would never be repaid. Yet the Torah warns, "but you shall surely open

your hand to him and you shall surely grant him enough for his lack which is lacking for him."

There are several reasons why the Torah ties the poor and the desolate to the Sh'mittah year. Poverty and laying fallow the land are tests of the individual and the community. Hashem promised to provide for every Jew in the land yet there seems to be a test we encounter every seventh year. When one has faith that Hashem provides, one comes to the realization that what he has is all that he really needs. Sharing our wealth with others will not diminish what Hashem will provide to us. There is an adage that the more tzedakah that one gives, the more that is returned to him.

The laws of the Sh'mittah year for forgiving of loans applies to everyone. Even when it is approaching the Sh'mittah year we must be open and generous to fill the needs of people within our community and within our families. Hashem does provide for all of us in one way or another, whether we receive the fulfillment of our needs directly through His generosity or indirectly through the generosity of others. May we understand this concept and be satisfied and grateful to Hashem for providing for our needs. And may we understand our responsibilities to our fellowman through the laws of Sh'mittah. ©2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

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Baal Tosif

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

One is forbidden to add on to the Mitzvot whether in relation to time (as in the case of adding an extra day to a holiday), or relating to an object (as in adding a fifth species in the Lulav, or another portion in the Tefillin), or adding any new Mitzvah. The question arises; how can our sages add for example the prohibition of eating chicken with milk when the Torah does not?

Some say that the prohibition of "Baal Tosif" is only if our Rabbis state that this is the law dictated in the Torah. However if they state that the prohibition is derived from the Rabbis it is permitted.

Others state that this law of "Baal Tosif" only applies to adding positive commandments ("Aseh") but negative commandments ("Lo Taaseh") are permissible for our sages to add. However this reasoning would present the question how our sages were able to enact the positive laws of Purim and Chanukah.

With regard to the adding of a day (as in the eighth day of the holiday of Succot) if one was to openly announce that he is not adding this day as an extra day of the holiday, in such a case it would be permitted. Thus Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook states, that if one made a "Heker" (a specific identification) to exclude it from the laws in the Torah it would be permissible. Thus in the case of Chanukah

and Purim , since in each of the two holidays there is a specific identification ("Heker")that separates it from the other holidays, it would be permissible to establish these laws(in the case of Purim there is a differentiation between those who live in a city surrounded by walls from the time of Joshua, and those who not, and with Chanukah there are three distinct ways of lighting the Menorah).

On the other hand, one who performs a Mitzvah numerous times during the day, or a woman who performs Mitzvot that are not obligatory for her to perform, do not transgress the prohibition of "Baal Tosif". However according to one view, if they perform these Mitzvot because they believe it is dictated from the Torah, they would indeed transgress the prohibition of "Baal Tosif". ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DANIEL STEIN

TorahWeb

The opening pasuk in Parshas Re'eh states, "Re'eh anochi nosein lifneichem hayom berachah u'klalah -- See that I have placed before you today a blessing and a curse" (Devarim 11:26). This passuk hints to a number of choices that are presented to us, not only regarding the mitzvos and their performance, but also concerning our ego, our time, and the new year, which all share a common scheme.

The meforshim wonder why the Torah uses the word "anochi -- I" as opposed to the more familiar "ani." The Maor Vashemesh explains in the name of the Maggid of Zlotchov that the word "anochi" represents not only the word "I" but more precisely our "anochiyus," our ego. Similarly, in Parshas Vaeschanan when Moshe informs Bnei Yisrael, "anochi omeid bein Hashem uveineichem -- I will stand between you and Hashem" (Devarim 5:5), he was not only referring to the fact the he would literally serve as the liaison between Hashem and the Jewish people, but also to the notion that often the primary obstacle standing in between ourselves and Hashem, impeding our ability to connect with Hashem, is our "anochi" our ego. The further we tread into the abyss of self-congratulation the more difficult it can be to identify potential areas for personal and religious growth.

Even though an inflated ego can hinder our ability to serve Hashem properly, self-awareness and self-confidence are necessary to achieve any measure of spiritual success. Rav Tzadok Hakohen (Tzidkas Hatzadik) writes that "just as a person must have emunah -- belief in Hashem, a person ought to have emunah -- belief in himself." In order to lead a life dedicated to Torah and mitzvos, a person must know that his life is meaningful and consequential and that his existence and accomplishments have an infinite value to Hashem and to himself. Indeed, Rav Aharon Kotler (Mishnas Rebbi Aharon) claims that the

prohibition against mutilating and defacing our bodies even while mourning (Devarim 14:1) is a reminder and reflection of our inherent and limitless self-worth. Without this awareness it is impossible to execute the mitzvos of the Torah. For this reason, those who publicly behave in a demeaning and degrading fashion are

disqualified from testifying in beis din (see Kiddushin 40b and Rambam Hil. Eidus 11:5). Rav Aharon explains that this is because someone who lacks personal dignity will presumably be capable of compromising their integrity as well.

The Maor Vashemesh submits that the pasuk "Re'eh anochi nosein lifneichem hayom berachah u'klalah," places before us a dilemma concerning our "anochi," our ego. If we utilize our "anochi" to give us the confidence to vigorously and relentlessly pursue an ambitious religious agenda, then it can certainly be a source of blessing. However, if our "anochi" lulls us into a bloated sense of entitlement and satisfaction, content with reveling in the achievements of the past, then it can be a horrible curse. How we use our "anochi" is entirely up to us.

Similarly, Rav Avraham Brum (Likuttei Eish) cites the Alexander Rebbe who interprets the word "hayom" -- "today" in this pasuk, as a reference to our time in general. For some, time is an invaluable blessing and for others it is an agonizing curse. For the righteous, who are methodically mastering the library of Torah, and continuously climbing the mountain of Hashem, time is the greatest of all assets and resources. As the Chafetz Chaim once said, "time is not money money is time." Additionally, Rav Moshe Shmuel Shapiro (Zehav Mi'sheba) maintains that the overall relative financial prosperity of American Jewry can be attributed to their benevolence and generosity, as well as their unforgiving and industrious work ethic. However, for those lacking direction and determination, who seek to drift through their existence in this world, time can be the greatest enemy. It is often viewed as a lurking beast which needs to be

slain and "killed", or as an obstruction which needs to be "passed" and whittled away. How will we view our time in this world, as a boundless blessing or as an interminable life-sentence? Once again, the decision is all ours.

Finally, the Vizhnitzer Rebbe (Imrei Chaim) suggests that the word "re'eh", spelled "reish, aleph, heh", is an acronym for Elul and Rosh Hashanah, which begin with the letters aleph, reish, and heh. This contention is supported by the Zohar which states that the word "hayom" -- "today," refers to "The Day" of Rosh Hashanah, the annual Day of Judgment. The month of Elul and Rosh Hashanah are alluded to in this pasuk because they too can either be exploited as a precious opportunity for reflection and spiritual growth, giving way to a year of blessing and prosperity, or

alternatively, they can be viewed as a burdensome inconvenience which simply needs to be tolerated and endured, contributing to and validating an unwanted decree for the coming year, chas ve'shalom. How will we approach Elul and Rosh Hashanah? It is up to us to decide.

This year, Parshas Re'eh introduces the month of Elul and confronts us with many difficult choices and possibilities. How to manage our ego? How to maximize our time? How to formulate a strategy for the Yomim Noraim and the coming year? However, the pasuk, "re'eh anochi nosein lifneichem hayom berachah u'klalah" alerts us to the realization that all of these issues are up to us, they are all in our own hands, and we are advised and encouraged to "choose life" -- "u'vacharta ba'chaim" (Devarim 30:19). May we have the strength to choose wisely and may Hashem grant us many years of continuous and limitless berachah and hatzlacha! A gut gebentched yor and a kesivah ve'chasima tovah! ©2018 Rabbi D. Stein & TorahWeb.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

This week's Parsha starts off with the word "Re'eh", which means "See". What are we seeing, and why do we need to see it? Rabbi Yehoshua Wender explains that in our lives we are all on a quest for truth. We are looking to find the real meaning behind everything in this world. However, we need to see everything in its proper light. In every thing in this world there is truth, and there could be falseness, and it is our job to not be tricked by the lies. So how do we know what's true and what's not?

G-d has given us a Torah that contains the ultimate truth, and that same protection from falseness. Living in this world is like being in a room of fun house mirrors. As you walk in, there are curvy mirrors that distort your image. Some make you look fat, others make you tall, and yet others make you skinny. The only way to get a true image of yourself is to look in a flat, uncurved mirror. The Torah is such a mirror: You can look in the Torah and find the truth, untainted, uncurved, undistorted. But it's also possible to get a true image from looking at a curvy mirror, if you stand in just the right spot, at just the right angle, where you can see your self the way you really are. The catch is that you won't know that it's your real true image unless you've looked at yourself in a straight mirror and have that image to compare with. The world is the same way: It is possible to see the world truthfully using other sources, but unless we have studied the Torah and know what truth looks like, we'll never know that we've really found it. ©2018 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

