

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Re'eh

Some parshiot inspire us with the extraordinary story of our people and others inspire us with the timeless wisdom of mitzvot. Parshat Re'eh is definitely a "mitzva parsha" and, as usual with such parshiot, it is difficult to find a common thread which unites its many commandments. Mitzvot often come in clusters whose united message is not readily apparent. Fortunately, the opening verse of our parsha gives away its elusive theme.

"You can see that I am placing before you both a blessing and a curse. The blessing is obeying the commandments of G-d your Lord, which I am proscribing to you today. The curse is if you do not obey the commandments of G-d your Lord, and you stray from the path that I am proscribing for you today, following foreign and false G-ds" (Devarim 11:26-28).

Although we are told here that we are blessed with free will, the truth is that many things are actually predetermined. The Talmud tells us that it is decided ahead of time whether we will be strong or weak, rich or poor, smart or stupid. But one thing is entirely in our own hands: whether to be righteous or sinful (Niddah 16b). That is one decision that we must make alone, and we are held fully responsible for our choice.

It can be argued that this is not altogether fair. We live in, and are certainly influenced by, a society. Although we all have our personal moral compasses, it is inevitable that people will be affected by the trends of their host society. Is it not human nature to accept societal norms? How can the individual be held accountable for his every move?

Maimonides (1135-1204) did not flinch before the power of that argument. He speaks in no uncertain terms: "It is natural for man's character and behavior to follow that of his friends and acquaintances... It is therefore necessary for man to both associate with the righteous and socialize with the wise in order to learn their ways, and maintain a distance from the sinful who walk in darkness in order not be influenced by their behavior... Therefore, if you live in a country whose society is corrupt, and whose people do not walk the straight path, move to a place where the men are righteous and good. And if every country that you are aware of is corrupt, as in our times (!), or if you are unable to travel to a good place because of border control or your health, then live in isolation... If, however, the locals are so evil that they will not allow you to dwell amongst them unless you become an active member of society and assimilate into their evil lifestyle, then escape to the caves, the thorn fields, and the wilderness, but never follow the path of the sinful..." (Laws of Character 6:1).

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Maimonides may sound a bit extreme here, but his point is well taken. The individual's responsibility for his behavior is inescapable, and a corrupt society is no excuse. We decide who we associate with and we are responsible for our choices.

Now let's take a look at our parsha. We find three mitzvot that are indigenous to Re'eh: how to deal with an idolatrous prophet, an idolatrous missionary, and an apostate city (13:2-19). The power of paganism to corrupt morality makes it the most dangerous disease that can develop within society. Its destructive influence must be rooted out.

Re'eh goes on to teach us the laws of kosher foods, and this is entirely consistent with our parsha's message. In order to keep our moral compass functioning properly, we need to maintain a spiritually healthy diet. Non-kosher foods dull the sensitivity of the Jewish soul (Yoma 39a).

The parsha ends with the three festivals, Passover, Shavuot, and Succot, and instructs us to visit Jerusalem on each of these holidays. Why go to Jerusalem? In the laws of the second tithe, our parsha tells us why: "in order to learn how to fear G-d all the days [of your life]" (14:23). The commentators explain that the righteousness and intense spirituality of the Torah scholars and Kohen-priests who live in Jerusalem inspire all who come into contact with them to live a more exalted, G-d-conscious life.

Free will is immutable, but external influences cannot be underestimated. Taking control of our lives includes filtering the steady stream of harmful stimulus, and creating a personal environment that is conducive to spiritual growth. This includes everything from what we eat to who we associate with. But we dare not ignore the fact that our lifestyle choices are influenced by the society that surrounds us. It affects us far more than we would like to admit.

Shabbat Shalom!

