

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Re'eh
August 31, 2019 *** 30 Av, 5779

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

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Re'eh in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2272/jewish/Reeh-in-a-Nutshell.htm

"See," says Moses to the people of Israel, "I place before you today a blessing and a curse"—the blessing that will come when they fulfill G-d's commandments, and the curse if they abandon them. These should be proclaimed on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal when the people cross over into the Holy Land.

A Temple should be established in "the place that G-d will choose to make dwell His name there," where the people should bring their sacrifices to Him; it is forbidden to make offerings to G-d in any other place. It is permitted to slaughter animals elsewhere, not as a sacrifice but to eat their meat; the blood (which in the Temple is poured upon the altar), however, may not be eaten.

A false prophet, or one who entices others to worship idols, should be put to death; an idolatrous city must be destroyed. The identifying signs for kosher animals and fish, and the list of non-kosher birds (first given in Leviticus 11), are repeated.

A tenth of all produce is to be eaten in Jerusalem, or else exchanged for money with which food is purchased and eaten there. In certain years this tithe is given to the poor instead. Firstborn cattle and sheep are to be offered in the Temple, and their meat eaten by the kohanim (priests).

The mitzvah of charity obligates a Jew to aid a needy fellow with a gift or loan. On the Sabbatical year (occurring every seventh year), all loans are to be forgiven. All indentured servants are to be set free after six years of service.

Our Parshah concludes with the laws of the three pilgrimage festivals—Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot—when all should go to "see and be seen" before G-d in the Holy Temple.

Haftarah in a Nutshell Isaiah 66:1–24

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3572702/jewish/Shabbat-Rosh-Chodesh-Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This haftarah, read whenever Shabbat coincides with Rosh Chodesh, mentions how in the messianic era, every Shabbat and every Rosh Chodesh everyone will come to the Temple to worship G-d.

In this prophecy Isaiah tells us how G-d (who is too great to be fully contained in physical space, even in the Temple) pays attention to the humble G-d-fearing person, and rejects a person who does (or even intends) evil.

The prophet continues to foretell the fortune that will come upon Jerusalem (and the Jewish nation) in the time to come, and how even non-Jews will come to recognize G-d and assist in restoring the Jewish people to their land and their Temple.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Collective Joy (Re'eh 5779)

<http://rabbisacks.org/collective-joy-reeh-5779/>

If we were to ask what key word epitomises the society Jews were to make in the Promised Land, several concepts would come to mind: justice, compassion, reverence, respect, holiness, responsibility, dignity, loyalty. Surprisingly, though, another word figures centrally in Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy. It is a word that appears only once in each of the other books of the Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers. [1] Yet it appears twelve times in Deuteronomy, seven of them in Parshat Re'eh. The word is simcha, joy.

It is an unexpected word. The story of the Israelites thus far has not been a joyous one. It has been marked by suffering on the one hand, rebellion and dissension on the other. Yet Moses makes it eminently clear that joy is what the life of faith in the land of promise is about. Here are the seven instances in this parsha, and their contexts:

1. The central Sanctuary, initially Shilo: "There in the presence of the Lord your God you and your families shall eat and rejoice in everything you have put your hand to, because the Lord your God has blessed you" (Deut. 12:7).

2. Jerusalem and the Temple: "And there you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites from your towns" (Deut. 12:12).

3. Sacred food that may be eaten only in Jerusalem: "Eat them in the presence of the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will choose – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites from your towns – and you are to rejoice before the Lord your God in everything you put your hand to" (Deut. 12:18).

4. The second tithe: "Use the silver to buy whatever you like: cattle, sheep, wine, or other fermented drink, or anything you wish. Then you and your household shall eat there in the presence of the Lord your God and rejoice" (Deut. 14:26).

5. The festival of Shavuot: "And rejoice before the Lord your God at the place He will choose as a dwelling for His name – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows living among you" (Deut. 16:11).

6. The festival of Succot: "Be joyful at your feast – you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows who live in your towns" (Deut. 16:14).

7. Succot, again. "For seven days, celebrate the feast to the Lord your God at the place the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete [vehayita ach same'ach]" (Deut. 16:15).

Why does Moses emphasise joy specifically in the book of Deuteronomy? Perhaps because is there, in the speeches Moses delivered in the last month of his life, that he scaled the heights of prophetic vision never reached by anyone else before or since. It is as if, standing on a mountaintop, he sees the whole course of Jewish history unfold below him, and from that dizzying altitude he brings back a message to the people gathered around him: the next generation, the children of those he led out of Egypt, the people who will cross the Jordan he will not cross and enter the land he is only able to see from afar.

What he tells them is unexpected, counter-intuitive. In effect he says this: "You know what your parents suffered. You have heard about their slavery in Egypt. You yourselves have known what it is to wander in the wilderness without a home or shelter or security. You may think those were the greatest trials, but you are wrong.

You are about to face a harder trial. The real test is security and contentment." Absurd though this sounds, it has proved true throughout Jewish history. In the many centuries of dispersion and persecution, from the destruction of the Second Temple to the nineteenth century, no one raised doubts about Jewish continuity. They did not ask, "Will we have Jewish grandchildren?" Only since Jews achieved freedom and equality in the Diaspora and independence and sovereignty in the State of Israel has that question come to be asked. When Jews had little to thank God for, they thanked Him, prayed to Him, and came to the synagogue and the house of study to hear and heed His word. When they had everything to thank Him for, many turned their backs on the synagogue and the house of study.

Moses was giving prophetic expression to the great paradox of faith: It is easy to speak to God in tears. It is hard to serve God in joy. It is the warning he delivered as the people came within sight of their destination: the Promised Land. Once there, they were in danger of forgetting that the land was theirs only because of God's promise to them, and only for as long as they remembered their promise to God.

Simcha is usually translated as joy, rejoicing, gladness, happiness, pleasure, or delight. In fact, simcha has a nuance untranslatable into English. Joy, happiness, pleasure, and the like are all states of mind, emotions. They belong to the individual. We can feel them alone. Simcha, by contrast, is not a private emotion. It means happiness shared. It is a social state, a predicate of "we," not "I." There is no such thing as feeling simcha alone.

Moses repeatedly labours the point. When you rejoice, he says time and again, it must be "you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the strangers, the fatherless, and the widows in your towns." A key theme of Parshat Re'eh is the idea of a central Sanctuary "in the place the Lord your God will choose." As we know from later Jewish history, during the reign of King David, this place was Jerusalem, where David's son Solomon eventually built the Temple.

What Moses is articulating for the first time is the idea of simcha as communal, social, and national rejoicing. The nation was to be brought together not just by crisis, catastrophe, or impending war, but by collective celebration in the presence of God. The celebration itself was to be deeply moral. Not only was this a religious act of thanksgiving; it was also to be a form of social inclusion. No one was to be left out: not the stranger, or the servant, or the lonely (the orphan and widow). In a remarkable passage in the Mishneh Torah, Maimonides makes this point in the strongest possible terms:

And while one eats and drinks, it is their duty to feed the stranger, the orphan, the widow, and other poor and unfortunate people, for those who lock the doors to their courtyard, eating and drinking with their family, without giving anything to eat and drink to the poor and the bitter in soul – their meal is not a rejoicing in a Divine commandment, but a rejoicing only in their own stomach. It is of such persons that Scripture says, "Their sacrifices shall be to them as the bread of mourners, all that eat thereof shall be polluted; for their bread is a disgrace to their own appetite" (Hos. 9:4). Rejoicing of this kind is a disgrace to those who indulge in it, as Scripture says, "And I will spread dung upon your faces, even the dung of your sacrifices" (Mal. 2:3).[2] Moses' insight remains valid today. The West is more affluent than any previous society has ever been. Our life expectancy is longer, our standards of living higher, and our choices wider than at any time since Homo sapiens first walked on earth. Yet Western societies are not measurably happier. The most telling indices of unhappiness – drug and alcohol abuse, depressive illness, stress-related syndromes, eating disorders, and the rest – have risen by between 300 and 1,000 per cent in the space of two generations. Why so?

In 1968 I met the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of blessed memory, for the first time. While I was there, the Chassidim told me the

following story. A man had written to the Rebbe in roughly these terms: "I am depressed. I am lonely. I feel that life is meaningless. I try to pray, but the words do not come. I keep mitzvot but find no peace of mind. I need the Rebbe's help." The Rebbe sent a brilliant reply without using a single word. He simply circled the first word of every sentence and sent the letter back. The word in each case was "I."

Our contemporary consumer is constructed in the first-person singular: I want, I need, I must have. There are many things we can achieve in the first-person singular but one we cannot, namely, simcha – because simcha is the joy we share, the joy we have only because we share. That, said Moses before the Israelites entered their land, would be their greatest challenge. Suffering, persecution, a common enemy, unite a people and turn it into a nation. But freedom, affluence, and security turn a nation into a collection of individuals, each pursuing his or her own happiness, often indifferent to the fate of those who have less, the lonely, the marginal, and the excluded. When that happens, societies start to disintegrate. At the height of their good fortune, the long slow process of decline begins.

The only way to avoid it, said Moses, is to share your happiness with others, and, in the midst of that collective, national celebration, serve God.[3] Blessings are not measured by how much we own or earn or spend or possess but by how much we share. Simcha is the mark of a sacred society. It is a place of collective joy. [1] Gen. 31:27; Ex. 4:14; Lev. 23:40; Num. 10:10. [2] Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Yom Tov 6:18. [3] The great French sociologist Émile Durkheim (whose father, grandfather, and great-grandfather were all rabbis) argued, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (trans. Karen E. Fields [New York: Free Press, 1995]), that religion is born in the experience of "collective effervescence," which is closely related to simcha in the biblical sense.

[There Never Was an Idolatrous City - Parashat Re'eh By Rabbi Len Levin](https://ajrsem.org/2019/08/parashat-reeh-5779/)

<https://ajrsem.org/2019/08/parashat-reeh-5779/>

"See, this day I set before you blessing and curse." (Deut. 11:26)

"I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life!" (Deut. 30:19)

It should be so simple. But life is rarely that simple.

The extreme of evil, which the Torah bids us shun, is idolatry (Deut. 13:2–19). What is idolatry? In rabbinic literature, idolatry is often equated with kafar ba-ikar —forsaking the fundamental principle of Judaism. In modern parlance, we have other ways of expressing supreme condemnation. "Disloyalty," "treason," and "self-hating Jew" come to mind. They carry the same valence of scorn, ostracism, and exclusion as "idolatry" in ancient discourse. Each is used implicitly to condemn an opponent as violating the fundamental principle of Judaism.

But there is more than one fundamental principle of Judaism.

In the Pesah Haggadah, we are told that the wicked child has dissociated himself from the Jewish people and thereby kafar ba-ikar — has violated the fundamental principle. (Haggadah, Magid, The Four Sons) It is easy to deduce the logic of this comment.

There is no Judaism without solidarity of the Jewish people. Especially after millennia of persecution culminating in the Holocaust, it is essential to affirm the right of survival of the Jewish people and to stand firm against any expression of anti-Semitism. Whoever denies this would not have been deserving of liberation from Egyptian slavery.

But another fundamental principle of Judaism is solidarity with all humanity. Rabbi Akiva found the klal gadol, the first principle of the Torah, in "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (Lev. 19:18) Simeon ben Azzai found it in: "This is the book of the generations of Adam: When God made man, He made him in the likeness of God." (Gen. 5:1) (Sifra Kedoshim 4) From this principle we derive: "You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 23:9)

It should be so simple to reconcile these principles: affirm the solidarity of the Jewish

people, and also love the stranger. Is not Judaism an interweave of particularist and universalist values? Is not each essential to the integrity of the whole?

But what if the party defending the stranger includes prominent political opponents of Israel, who have occasionally expressed themselves in the language of anti-Semitism? And what if the party posing as the most powerful friend of Israel is also an oppressor of the stranger?

In his book *The Boundaries of Judaism*, Donniel Hartman develops a conceptual framework of pluralism and boundaries. Each of us stands in the center of an array of concentric circles. At the center are those with whom we are in complete agreement. As we move away from the center we encounter successive zones of legitimate disagreement. At the periphery we encounter those we label as “deviants.” Within the deviant category itself we distinguish between “tolerable deviants” whom we include within our circle and “intolerable deviants” whom we relegate to the outside. Confronted with the dilemma we have described, there are two main parties among today’s Jews. One party has chosen the survival of Jewish peoplehood as the preeminent value and has accepted the self-styled champion of Israel as a true friend, acknowledging his other faults in the category of “tolerated deviance,” while consigning the defenders of the stranger who are guilty of anti-Semitic pronouncements as “intolerable deviants.”

The other party has made the reverse choice: placing Judaism’s universal values as preeminent, accepting the flawed spokespersons of the stranger as “tolerated deviants” while regarding the self-styled champion of Israel as an “intolerable deviant.” Neither has chosen perfection. Each has chosen one of the several values of Judaism as primary, while tolerating imperfection with respect to other Jewish values.

Shall the one party, holding the preeminence of Jewish survival, regard the other party as idolatrous or traitors, because they include among their political allies some who are proponents of the Palestinian cause and have criticized Israel? Or shall the other party, holding the preeminence of universal social values, regard the first party as idolatrous because they ally themselves with one who has sometimes championed Israel’s interests but has far from a perfect score in complying with other Jewish values such as embracing the stranger?

Fully anathematizing an individual or group can have grave consequences. Our Torah portion prescribes that if an entire city is guilty of idolatry, that city should be razed to the ground and all its inhabitants be put to death (Deut. 13:13–19). But our rabbis placed insurmountable obstacles to carrying out these penalties. To start, the judgment on such a case would have to be decided by a Sanhedrin of 71 judges. Many other difficult technical objections would have to be met as well. In the end, the Talmud concludes: “There never was, nor will there ever be, an idolatrous city. Why, then, was the law for it written in the Torah? So that you may learn it and receive your reward” (Sanhedrin 71a).

We each must act by the light of what is right as God has given us to see that right. At the same time, we should be very cautious about casting aspersions on our fellow-Jews who see things differently and have come to different conclusions about what Jewish values bid us to do in the present situation.

None was more zealous for God’s honor than the prophet Elijah. After standing up to the prophets of Baal at Mount Carmel, he fled to Horeb and poured out his heart to God: “I have been very zealous for the Lord, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life.” (I Kings 19:10) God corrected him, saying that there remained seven thousand who had not knelt to Baal. (19:18) At the same time, God instructed Elijah to appoint Elisha as his successor. Why? The rabbis suggest: Elijah showed great respect for God, but too little respect for the Jewish people, whereupon God told him: *Ee ifshi binevuatékha* — “I no longer want you to serve as my prophet.” (Mekhilta d’Rabbi Ishmael 12:1)

As we fight for God's honor, let us not impugn the honor of our fellow-Jews. (Rabbi Len Levin teaches Jewish philosophy at AJR. He is the editor of *Studies in Judaism and Pluralism*.)

All Your Soul Desires by Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=96db4fc5-ae53-4e05-9ff9-a523bf068b2a>

One of the great pleasures of visiting Israel for many kosher-keepers is the ready availability of kosher meat and meat restaurants. Whether we're talking about high-end cuisine or street food, the quality, variety, and value in Israel put Manhattan, Teaneck, Paris, Los Angeles, and Miami to shame. The poultry is raised locally, but the vast quantity of red meat on offer is a mix of domestically raised sheep and cattle and imports from South America or Central/Eastern Europe. Whereas in the past meat was likely to appear only for Shabbat and holiday meals, as Israel has developed into a wealthier country, meat consumption has gone up dramatically, even as Israelis continue to love their fresh fruit and vegetables.

But despite Israeli and Jewish love for meat, our Torah is far more ambivalent. A simple reading of Bereishit reveals that God's plan had been for humans and animals to eat the yield of seed-bearing plants and trees, and "every green herb." (Bereishit 1:29-30). It is only after the world has fallen so completely and God brings a flood to wipe it out that Noach and his family are given permission to eat meat. But this concession, perhaps necessary to keep humans from eating each other, came with the caveat not to eat either blood or limbs torn from a living animal. This move acknowledged our animal nature and placed us at the top of the food chain, but it also sought to "humanize" our consumption as well.

We see meat again being given as a concession when the Israelites were in the desert. God wanted the Israelites to eat only the manna, but they complained so bitterly about missing meat that God sent enough quail to kill them (Bemidbar 11:4-34).

With the building of the Mishkan and institution of the sacrifices, the consumption of meat was both limited, and elevated, further. One could only eat the meat of certain kosher animals (see Vayikra 11 Parashat Shmini, and Devarim 14:3-21 in our parashah), and only then when bringing them as a korban shelamim (peace offering) - the main course of a shared holy meal with the priests and God. And to the prohibition of consuming blood, the Torah added the prohibition of eating meat with milk - like blood, another symbol of life.

With everything trending in that direction, it may seem odd that in our parashah we find a verse that widens the consumption of meat. Deuteronomy 12:20 says "When the LORD your God expands your borders, as he has promised you, and you say, 'I shall eat some meat', because you long to eat meat; you may eat meat whenever you wish." We might have expected this to mean that altars would be set up throughout Israelite territory so that one would not have to travel to bring and consume sacrificial meat. But with the Torah's preference for a single sacrificial center, and its repeated injunctions not to do as the idol worshipers had done and build multiple altars, meat-eating becomes disconnected from sacrifices. Slaughtered properly, meat can be eaten whenever and by whomever.

And that brings us to today. There is a strong Torah-case to be made for vegetarianism as God's preferred way for us to eat. At the same time, the concession God makes to our nature seems to reflect the deep desire many people have to eat meat, and the great satisfaction they get from it. But even if we accept the latter argument, the rules of kashrut and the connection of meat-eating to Temple worship call upon us not to eat meat casually or with abandon.

This can express itself in any number of ways. There are many who, in imitation of Rav Kook, only eat meat on Shabbat. There are others who are particularly careful about the treatment of the animals when they are being raised, transported, and slaughtered. More humane treatment raises the price of the meat they consume, leading them to

eat meat more rarely. Still, others try to stay conscious of what they are eating by witnessing or even conducting the ritual slaughter themselves. At the Conservative Yeshiva, multiple students study each year with Rabbi Shlomo Zacharow to do proper shechita (kosher slaughter).

When the Torah permits us to eat meat "b'chol avat nafshecha" (Devarim 12:20-21) we can translate it, as some do, to mean "to our heart's content." But we can also see in the Torah's use of "nefesh" (soul) as the source of this desire, a hint to bring a greater degree of soulfulness and elevated consciousness to our consumption. *(Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz is the Conservative Yeshiva Director of Engagement)*

D'var Haftarah: Miraculous Birth by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein

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Since Rosh Hodesh is on Shabbat, the cycle of the seven haftarot of consolation is broken with the reading of the special haftarah for Shabbat Rosh Hodesh. The haftarah which would have been read this Shabbat will be combined with the haftarah which will be read on Shabbat Ki Tetze since the two haftarot are adjoined in the book of Isaiah. The haftarah that we read this Shabbat is, nevertheless, considered appropriate to the theme of consolation since it also includes a message of redemption.

The miracle of birth is a common redemptive theme, and, how much more so, the experience of a miraculous birth. The redemptive activities which accompanied the return from Babylonian exile are described in those terms: "Before she labors, she gives birth, before the birth pangs come upon her, she delivers a boy. Who heard the likes of this, who has seen things like these? Can a land go through a birth in a single day, can a nation be born in a single breath? For Zion went into labor, gave birth to her children. Shall I cause labor and not bring about birth? said the Lord. Shall I bring about birth and block the womb? Said your God." (66:7-9)

The miracle of sudden birth is used here as a message to the mother, "Zion", the symbolic name of the Judean homeland, as a sign that its redemption will be quick like a sudden birth. Even more remarkably, the birth would be without birth pains. This, coupled with the idea that the redemption would be inevitable, mark it as miraculous. (S. Paul, Isaiah 40-66, Mikra L'Yisrael, pp. 562-4)

Birth is a miraculous wonder but it is not without its tedium, hard work and pain. Still, it is a wonder of the human condition that once it is done, humans are conditioned to set the latter aside. This is why we can imagine the wonders of birth without all of the toil associated with it. The prophet is asking his audience to think of the "rebirth" of the nation that way.

Historical processes tend to grind away in a slow and methodical way, much like childbirth. It is hard to see and/or sense the miraculous nature of events, especially when they take place in the actual hard work of transformation. The prophet is asking those involved in the return from Babylonia to look at the events they are living through poet eyes and to allow themselves to feel its miraculous nature.

We are not trained today to have the eyes of a poet, to see the miraculous in the banal drudgery of the details of life. Still, the making of a nation out of the ruins of what once was but had been destroyed, even with all the debates and battles, all of the conflicts and setbacks, the anxiety over the moral dilemmas of founding a nation is still a miracle of mythic proportions. The prophet urges us not to lose sight of this. *(Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein is on the Conservative Yeshiva Faculty)*

Blood, Water, and Desire : Re'eh by Marcus Mordechai Schwartz

<http://www.jtsa.edu/blood-water-and-desire>

Only be sure that you do not eat the blood; for the blood is the life, and you shall not eat the life with the meat. (Deut. 12:23)

"And once I saw her menstrual blood . . . saw it shining darkly up at me from the

worn linoleum in front of the kitchen sink . . . Also in this icon is an endless dripping of blood down through a drainboard into a dishpan. It is the blood she is draining from the meat so as to make it kosher and fit for consumption. Probably I am confusing things . . . but I see her standing at the sink salting the meat so as to rid it of its blood, when the attack of woman's troubles sends her, with a most alarming moan, rushing off to her bedroom. I was no more than four or five, and yet those two drops of blood that I beheld on the floor of her kitchen are visible to me still." (Philip Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*, 42–43)

These days most observant Jewish women in North America do not soak and salt their own meat. What was once a common and familiar marker of Jewish kitchens, and a deeply gendered rite of passage for young Jewish women, has been professionalized and sequestered away from the eyes of most of those who cook and eat kosher meat. In the United States, the act itself is often performed by mostly non-Jewish workers under the supervision of Orthodox rabbis—a largely male caste. The sounds, sights, and smells of this “kashering” process as performed today would seem strange, unfamiliar, and perhaps even repulsive to most Jewish North American women. The remaining women whose mothers taught them this little ritual of water, blood, and salt, with its ramped wooden drainboard, are now mostly in their late sixties and early seventies. Within the next twenty or thirty years, for all practical purposes, its existence as a rite commonly performed by women in Jewish kitchens may pass from living memory.

This shift in location from home to commercial setting has happened in my own lifetime. As recently as the 1970s, Rabbi Isaac Klein, the Conservative Movement's widely-accepted posek (adjudicator of Jewish law), wrote this piece of practical advice:

We would suggest that housewives who put meat into a deep freeze should, as a rule, kasher them first and then freeze them. In cases of emergency, however, and where the meat was accidentally not kashered, we permit the kashering of the meat after it was taken out of the deep freeze. (*A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice*, 353)

What is relevant for us is that the tradition of kashering meat at home was still robust enough at the time he was writing that a sufficiently abundant number of Jewish women would have been interested in whether they should kasher their meat before or after freezing. I think it unlikely that a contemporary rabbi would write such a passage for a popular Jewish audience. The question is simply not relevant to the lived day-to-day practice of observant Jews in the English-speaking world.

One of my earliest memories is of my mother beside the kitchen sink with raw meat laying before her on a slanted board, a small blue box of kosher salt on the counter. The memory is vague and foggy and yet strikingly immediate, tinged with the metallic scent of blood. There was a time when these miniature scenes of decontamination were common to the point that Jewish men and boys' imaginations of their mothers, sisters, wives, and daughters were suffused with a ferrous crimson. Philip Roth was only able to use the iconography of salt, blood, kitchen, and mother so powerfully because of its familiarity to him and other Jewish men of his generation. In times and places other than our own, Jewish women wielded a curious power in the control they held over blood. Blood was threatening and dangerous, possessing a hazard. Women held the antidote in the form of two water-based rituals—kashering and mikveh. This decontamination had to occur before Jews could eat meat or make love.

JTS professor emerita Rabbi Judith Hauptman has argued compellingly that already in the time of the Mishnah women took power over the ritual complex of niddah (menstrual impurity) by invoking stringencies or leniencies in matters of seeing menstrual blood. As she writes, “The rabbis seem to have sensed that in the area of niddah women had taken matters into their own hands” (*Rereading the Rabbis*, Ch. 7). These ancient rabbinic women controlled the reactivity of desire, either

drowning it in blood, or rousing it with water.

Meat was also long linked with desire in rabbinic representation. Deuteronomy 12:20 reads:

When the Lord your God enlarges your territory, as He has promised you, and you say, "I am going to eat some meat," because you wish to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you have the desire.

Sifrei Deuteronomy, an early work of Midrash, already contextualizes the dispensation for the eating of non-sacral meat in the quenching of desire.

Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah says: Scripture comes only to teach you proper behavior. For a person should not eat meat unless they desire it. (pis. 75)

Most notably, Roth's association of kashering with the blood of menstruation is not coincidental. For a non-trivial amount of time, soaking and salting was an oral tradition among women, as with niddah, passed from mother to daughter. It also arose from a culture of blood taboo and purity—it was a practice that seemed normal, mundane, and unremarkable. It is only now when kashering has become a strange, alien, and unfamiliar thing that we have the possibility of seeing its full range of associations with clarity.

The term "ostranenie" (often translated as "defamiliarization" or "estrangement") was first coined in 1925 by the Russian literary theorist Viktor Shklovsky in his essay "Art as Device." Shklovsky claimed that presenting audiences with common things in an unfamiliar or strange way (as art does) allows recovery and restoration—a fresh and renewed experience of quotidian events, circumstances, and entities. When a thing is common and familiar we tend to take it as a given and it escapes our attentiveness. Even matters possessing storied pasts and profound symbolic potency become hum-drum and disregarded. Framing them in new perceptual contexts grants us a new clarity of vision and rejuvenates our capacity to attend to them.

This is the gift that Roth gave in the above passage from Portnoy's Complaint. We are able to see the tensions and fault lines of depuration, disgust, desire, femininity, food, and fear that all join together in this workaday observance. These blood taboos serve to compromise between the two negative possible extremes: giving in to the chaos that desire contains in potentia, on the one hand; and the repressive stifling of the drives that make life vital on the other. The desires for meat and sex are dangerous; either desire can spill over into violence and rip a community apart. Yet, without some indulgence life is meagre and grey. Throughout the novel, Portnoy finds himself trapped in exactly this conflict between chaos and suppression, the Torah's solution of moderating life with blood and water denied to him (and even unconsidered) because of the modern casting off of religious ritual life.

In our distance from this blood-purging food ritual's commonplace recurrence, now that it is hidden from our eyes and made strange to us, we are doubly blessed. On the one hand, this act of purity and decontamination still resides in living memory. We can see it just barely out of grasp, perhaps ready for us to reclaim it. On the other hand, it has all but disappeared from the observed life of the contemporary Jew. And through its strangeness we see its roots in an older, broader domain—Scripture's apprehension of blood rooted in its association with unrestrained desire. Today we can witness it oozing life as it disappears from the hearths of the Jewish people in favor of the system of commercial and industrial kashrut. Let us pray that we are observant enough to mark its passing and decide how we should respond.

(Marcus Mordecai Schwartz is the Director of the Matthew Eisenfeld and Sara Duker Beit Midrash; Assistant Professor, Talmud and Rabbinics)

Yahrtzeits

Cynthia Schwartz remembers her mother Elaine Schwartz on Thur. Sept. 5th (Elul 5).

Ilisia Kissner remembers her uncle Hyman Rosenblum (Hayyim Ben Yehezkiel haLevi) on Fri. Sept 6th (Elul 6).

