

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Re'eh
August 15, 2020 *** Av 25, 5780

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.

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

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/544558/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's *haftarah* is the third of a series of seven "haftarot of Consolation." These seven *haftarot* commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.

G-d addresses the "afflicted and storm-tossed" Jerusalem "who has not been comforted," assuring her that she, and her people, will be restored to full glory. The foundation, walls and ground of Jerusalem will be laid with precious stones. Her children will be "disciples of the L-rd," and will enjoy abundant peace. Any weapon engineered against her will fail.

The prophet then invites the thirsty to acquire "water," namely those who are thirsty for spirituality should study the quenching words of Torah. He promises

the nation an everlasting covenant similar to that made with King David. This is also an allusion to the Messiah, David's descendant, who will be revered by all of the nations of the world.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

The Good Society (Re'eh 5780) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<https://rabbisacks.org/reeh-5780/>

Moses, having set out the prologue and preamble to the covenant and its broad guiding principles, now turns to the details, which occupy the greater part of the book of Devarim, from chapter 12 to chapter 26. But before he begins with the details, he states a proposition that is the most fundamental one in the book, and one that would be echoed endlessly by Israel's Prophets:

See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the path that I enjoin upon you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced. (Deut. 11:26-28)

If you behave well, things will go well. If you act badly, things will turn out badly. Behaving well means honouring our covenant with God, being faithful to Him, heeding His words and acting in accordance with His commands. That was the foundation of the nation. Uniquely it had God as its liberator and lawgiver, its sovereign, judge and defender. Other nations had their gods, but none had a covenant with any of them, let alone with the Creator of heaven and earth. And yes, as we saw last week, there are times when God acts out of chessed, performing kindness to us even though we do not deserve it. But do not depend on that. There are things Israel must do in order to survive. Therefore, warned Moses, beware of any temptation to act like the nations around you, adopting their gods, worship or practices. Their way is not yours. If you behave like them, you will perish like them. To survive, let alone thrive, stay true to your faith, history and destiny, your mission, calling and task as "a Kingdom of Priests and a holy nation."

As you act, so shall you fare. As I put it in my book *Morality*, a free society is a moral achievement. The paradoxical truth is that a society is strong when it cares for the weak, rich when it cares for the poor, and invulnerable when it takes care of the vulnerable. Historically, the only ultimate guarantor of this is a belief in Someone greater than this time and place, greater than all time and place, who guides us in the path of righteousness, seeing all we do, urging us to see the world as His work, and humans as His image, and therefore to care for both. Bein adam le-Makom and bein adam le-chavero – the duties we have to God and those we owe our fellow humans – are inseparable. Without a belief in God we would pursue our own interests, and eventually those at the social margins, with little power and less wealth, would lose. That is not the kind of society Jews are supposed to build.

The good society does not just happen. Nor is it created by the market or the state. It is made from the moral choices of each of us. That is the basic message of Deuteronomy: will we choose the blessing or the curse? As Moses says at the end of the book:

This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live. (30:15, 19)

The test of a society is not military, political, economic or demographic. It is moral and spiritual. That is what is revolutionary about the biblical message. But is it really so? Did not ancient Egypt have the concept of ma'at, order, balance, harmony with the universe, social stability, justice and truth? Did not the Greeks and Romans, Aristotle especially, give a central place to virtue? Did not the Stoics create an influential moral system, set out in the writings of Seneca and Marcus Aurelius? What is different about the way of Torah?

Those ancient systems were essentially ways of worshipping the state, which was given cosmic significance in Pharaonic Egypt and heroic significance in Greece and Rome. In Judaism we do not serve the state; we serve God alone. The unique ethic of the covenant, whose key text is the book of Devarim, places on each of us an immense dual responsibility, both individual and collective.

I am responsible for what I do. But I am also responsible for what you do. That is one meaning of the command in Kedoshim: "You shall surely remonstrate with your neighbour and not bear sin because of him." As Maimonides wrote in his Sefer ha-Mitzvot, "It is not right for any of us to say, 'I will not sin, and if someone else sins, that is a matter between him and his God'. This is the opposite of the Torah." [1] In other words, it is not the state, the government, the army or the police that is the primary guardian of the law, though these may be necessary (as indicated at the beginning of next week's parsha: "You shall appoint magistrates and officials for your tribes"). It is each of us and all of us together. That is what makes the ethic of the covenant unique.

We see this in a phrase that is central to American politics and does not exist at all in British politics: "We, the people." These are the opening words of the preamble to the American constitution. Britain is not ruled by "We, the people." It is ruled by Her Majesty the Queen whose loyal subjects we are. The difference is that Britain is not a covenant society whereas America is: its earliest key texts, the Mayflower Compact of 1620 and John Winthrop's address on board the Arbella in 1630, were both covenants, built on the Deuteronomy model. [2] Covenant means we cannot delegate moral responsibility away to either the market or the state. We – each of us, separately and together – make or break society.

Stoicism is an ethic of endurance, and it has some kinship with Judaism's wisdom literature. Aristotle's ethic is about virtue, and much of what he has to say is of permanent value. Rambam had enormous respect for it. But embedded in his outlook was a hierarchical mindset. His portrait of the "great-souled man" is of a person of aristocratic bearing, independent wealth and high social status.

Aristotle would not have understood Abraham Lincoln's statement about a new nation, "dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

The Greeks were fascinated by structures. Virtually all the terms we use today – democracy, aristocracy, oligarchy, tyranny – are Greek in origin. The message of Sefer Devarim is, yes, create structures – courts, judges, officers, priests, kings – but what really matters is how each of you behaves. Are you faithful to our collective mission in such a way that "All the peoples on earth will see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they will be in awe of you" (Deut. 28:10)? A free society is made less by structures than by personal responsibility for the moral-spiritual order.

This was once fully understood by the key figures associated with the emergence (in their different ways) of the free societies of England and America. In England Locke distinguished between liberty, the freedom to do what you may, and licence, the freedom to do what you want.[3] Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America*, wrote that "Liberty cannot be established without morality, nor morality without faith." [4] In his Farewell Address, George Washington wrote, "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion, and morality are indispensable supports."

Why so? What is the connection between morality and freedom? The answer was given by Edmund Burke:

"Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains upon their own appetites... Society cannot exist, unless a controlling power upon will and appetite be placed somewhere; and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters." [5]

In other words, the less law enforcement depends on surveillance or the police, and the more on internalised habits of law-abidingness, the freer the society. That is why Moses, and later Ezra, and later still the rabbis, put so much emphasis on learning the law so that it became natural to keep the law.

What is sad is that this entire constellation of beliefs – the biblical foundations of a free society – has been almost completely lost to the liberal democracies of the West. Today it is assumed that morality is a private affair. It has nothing to do with the fate of the nation. Even the concept of a nation has become questionable in a global age. National cultures are now multi-cultures. Elites no longer belong "somewhere"; they are at home "anywhere." [6] A nation's strength is now measured by the size and growth of its economy. The West has reverted to the Hellenistic idea that freedom has to do with structures – nowadays, democratically elected governments – rather than the internalised morality of "We, the people."

I believe Moses was right when he taught us otherwise: that the great choice is between the blessing and the curse, between following the voice of God or the seductive call of instinct and desire. Freedom is sustained only when a nation

becomes a moral community. And any moral community achieves a greatness far beyond its numbers, as we lift others and they lift us.

Shabbat Shalom [1] Rambam, Sefer ha-Mitzvot, positive command 205. [2] See the recent survey: Meir Soloveichik, Matthew Holbreich, Jonathan Silver and Stuart Halpern, Proclaim liberty throughout the land: the Hebrew Bible in the United States, a sourcebook, 2019. [3] John Locke, The Second Treatise of Civil Government (1690), chapter 2. [4] Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, Introduction. [5] Edmund Burke, Letter to a Member of the National Assembly (1791). [6] David Goodhart, The Road to Somewhere, Penguin, 2017.

[Gratitude During Challenging Times by Malka Strasberg Edinger](http://www.jtsa.edu/gratitude-during-challenging-times) <http://www.jtsa.edu/gratitude-during-challenging-times>

This week's parashah begins with the verse רָאָה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה / "Behold, I set before you today blessings and curses" (Deut. 11:26).

Within the context of the biblical narrative, this verse refers to a choice given to the Israelites upon entering the Promised Land: they could either choose to follow God's commandments and reap rewards, or not to follow God's commandments and suffer negative consequences. The blessings and curses set before the Israelites are enumerated in Deuteronomy 27–28, and were read publicly upon entering the Land, as recounted in Joshua 8:30–35.

But what can this verse mean to us today, in the twenty-first century, when we are no longer standing on the border of the Promised Land following a forty-year trek in the desert? If the Bible speaks to people in all times and places, how can we discern the verse's relevance to our own lives?

I understand the word הַיּוֹם / "today" in the same way that the Midrash understands the words הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה / "this day" in Exodus 19:1 and Deuteronomy 27:9.

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לְצֵאת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ מִדְּבַר סִינַי:

"In the third month since the children of Israel's leaving the Land of Egypt, on this day, they arrived at the wilderness of Sinai." (Exod. 19:1)

הִסְכַּתוּ וּשְׁמַעוּ עִשְׂרָאֵל הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה נְהִיְתָ לְעַם לֵאלֹהֵי אֱ-לֹהֵיךָ

"Be silent and hear, O Israel; this day you have become a people of Hashem your God." (Deut. 27:9)

Why does the Torah use the words "this day" in each of these verses? Exodus 19:1 would read better with the words "on that day," and Deuteronomy 27:9

doesn't actually take place on the day the nation entered a covenant with Hashem! In his commentary on each of these verses, Rashi, the preeminent medieval Jewish biblical exegete, references midrashim (cited in Yalkut Shimoni 273 and BT Berakhot 63a, respectively) which present the idea that *on any given day that these words are read or heard*—meaning *on every single day*—it should feel as though the event in question (receiving the Torah or entering into a covenant with God) is occurring "today." Similarly, in our verse in Parashat

Re'eh, on any given day that we read these words, we are being told that God is giving us blessings and curses.

In the biblical narrative, בְּרַכָּהוּ וּקְלָלָה (previously translated as “blessings and curses”) refers to a choice between receiving blessings *or* curses, depending on our behavior. Yet this phrase does not have to be read as a choice. Rather, it can be understood to encompass both: God giving us both blessings *and* curses at the same time. Life is full of both positives and negatives simultaneously. We all have blessings for which we're grateful and experience hardships that feel like curses; they co-exist in our lives, and we don't get to choose only the good or only the bad.

In this verse, the Torah is directing us toward the realization that both the good and bad in our lives come from God, as is written: אֲנִי מְנַתְּנֶיךָ / “I am giving you.” Indeed, Jewish practice acknowledges that both the positive and negative in our lives come from God. The Shulhan Arukh, OH 222:1–2, teaches us that upon hearing good news or experiencing something extremely positive, we recite either the blessing *Hatov vehemetiv* / “Who is good and causes good,” or *Sheheheyanu* / “Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.” We also recite a blessing upon hearing bad news or experiencing something extremely negative, that of *Dayan ha'emet* / “Who is the True Judge.” It is not our place to accept the good that God gives us and reject the bad; we don't get to pick and choose God's lot for us. Additionally, we are not to blame God for the negative things we suffer while taking credit for the positive things in our lives; Deuteronomy 8 already warned us against that.

“Beware lest you forget your God . . . and you say in your heart: ‘My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth.’ But you shall remember your God, for it is He that gives you power to get wealth . . .” (Deut. 8:11, Deut. 8:17–18)

The first word in our parashah, *Re'eh* / “See,” charges us to recognize that all of the above are true. The 12th century Spanish biblical exegete Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra notes that the command “*re'eh*” is written in the singular despite Moshe's speaking to all the Israelites, because Moshe addressed each individual who was present. We can learn from this that it is incumbent upon each and every one of us to internalize the verse's message.

Each of us must recognize that we receive both blessings and curses from God every day. Sometimes it is easy—and during these challenging days of pandemic, perhaps almost unavoidable—to g. But the opening verse of this week's parashah enjoins us to recognize and appreciate every good thing with which God blesses us, even at a time when we may be coet caught up in the travails of the day and lose sight of the blessings in our lives. It is also easy to take certain privileges for granted and stop being consciously grateful for themntending with challenges and losses that would have seemed unimaginable a year ago. We are literally instructed to “see” God's gifts.

May we all strive not to lose sight of our blessings, and in recognizing them every day, merit increased peace and joy in our lives. (Malkah Strasberg Edinger is Adjunct Lecturer in Bible at JTS)

[Parashat Re'eh 5780 by Rabbi Bruce Alpert](https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/)
<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

“And you will rejoice before the Lord, your God, you and your son and your daughter and your man-servant and your maid-servant and Levite who is within your gates, and the stranger and the orphan and the widow that is among you.” (Deuteronomy 16:11)

I recently asked my teacher, Dr. Victoria Hoffer, why, when she published the first edition of her textbook Biblical Hebrew, she chose the above verse for the cover. She told me that, too often, students come to the study of Hebrew with a kind of grim seriousness. She wanted a verse that expressed the joy of learning and of studying the Bible in its original language.

Knowing that book cover as well as I do, the verse jumped out at me from this week's parashah, Re'eh. It did so for reasons beyond familiarity; reasons similar to Dr. Hoffer's. Our parashah too has a grim quality about it. We are commanded to destroy, tear down, smash and burn all semblances of the worship practices of the previous occupants of the promised land. (Deuteronomy 12:2-3) We are required to put to death the dreamer or prophet who seeks to divert us from the worship of our God. (Deuteronomy 13:2-6) We are even expected to stone to death a sibling or a wife or even a child who seeks to lead us into idol worship: “let not your eye pity him, nor spare, nor shield him.” (Deuteronomy 13:9)

Verses like these contribute to the widespread notion of “the vengeful God of the Old Testament” and all the antisemitism that flows from it. But for me, as I hope for most Jews, they are hyperbole. They stand out for being stark and vivid warnings against idolatry, but they are not what Judaism is about.

Our faith is not about punishing heresy but recognizing – and ultimately rejoice in – blessing. When we sing Birkat HaMazon at our dinner table or Psalm 150 in our shuls, when we gather friends and family at our seders or in our sukkahs, when we grasp an ancient syllogism or marvel at a modern insight, we are rejoicing. Judaism is the most joyful of religions because it revels in the goodness of being alive.

We find ourselves living through grim times. I sense that, beneath the fear many of us feel, is a well of inchoate anger at “the world,” at “the system,” at “our leadership.” Righteous indignation at prejudice, injustice and mendacity is, I believe, a noble sentiment. But to allow that indignation to rule one's life, to allow it to blind us to our many blessings, is another form of the idolatry that our Torah so dramatically rails against. Failure to celebrate our blessings is to spurn

the reality of our lives in favor of our own priorities. Yet how can those priorities ultimately be for good if we lack the ability to recognize and to celebrate what is already good in our lives?

For all the scariness of these times and for all the uncertainty they pose for the future, I cannot but think that for many of us – perhaps even most of us – our lives are filled with unparalleled blessing and, at least, the hope that we may enjoy those blessings tomorrow as well. That being true, we should not give into our grim fears. Rather, we should rejoice before the Lord with our sons and our daughters and our loved ones and – most especially – with those less fortunate, who most need the reminder that where there is life, there can be joy. (Rabbi Bruce Alpert (AJR '11) is Rabbi of Beth Israel Synagogue in Wallingford, CT.)

[Finding, and Following, Your North](http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=04d9b02c-d3a0-420f-af04-5aff12268d90) by Rabbi Rami Schwartz

<http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=04d9b02c-d3a0-420f-af04-5aff12268d90>

Finding, and Following, Your North Stick with it. Stay the course. Much of the ink of Torah has dried over the directive of loyalty to God and Torah. The Torah has already directed us to be careful not to follow the lustful urges of our hearts and eyes (Num. 15:39), or the practices and ways of other nations (Lev. 18:3). This week we are reminded over an entire chapter to follow God and Torah, but the nature of this command differs subtly from what we have seen before.

Parashat Re'eh presents a Moshe in particular anxiety over the upcoming transition of leadership. Having already advised the people not to turn away towards the idolatry of outsiders or the idolatrous inclinations of our inner urges he now warns about danger of a more insidious kind: good advice from a reputable or trusted source: "When a prophet or dream-diviner pops up in your midst and gives you a sign or strong evidence...[or] when your sibling - your mother's own child - or your son or daughter, your own loving partner or your closest friend tempts you in secret, saying 'come, let us show devotion to other Gods'" ... (Deut. 13:2, 7). Turn away, wipe out their very presence from your life. Cancel them.

This chapter is so deeply concerned with neutralizing distractions that Moshe offers six different actions in quick succession as a remedy to this sort of interference: "Follow only Adonai your God, and revere God; observe God's commandments, and heed God's orders; worship God, and cleave to God" (Deut. 13:5-6). These verbs together convey a sense of urgency, a need to act when temptation is greatest. They culminate in a word more unique to this moment: t'dabb'kun, "stick to God." Or in Onkelos's Aramaic, tit'kar'vun: "keep God close [in mind]." Moshe is not worried that we will, in the absence of his steadfast leadership, make the immoral decision to take on the practices of our enemies. He knows we want to do what is right. His concern is not that we will

choose the wrong path out of callousness, but that we will forget our path out of spiritual myopia.

The image of Ulysses resonates here: the hero, fundamentally committed to returning home to Ithaca, knew of the Sirens' power to entice travelers from their course. So he tied himself up and ordered his closest shipmates not to untie him no matter how much he pleads. Parashat Re'eh is Moshe's plea that Israel tie themselves to the mast of Torah. It is our guidance for how to weather the storm of influence that constantly pulls us from our dreams.

This is no doubt what the Hassidic master R' Yaakov Yosef of Polonne had in mind when he reinterpreted the parashah's opening verse. He knew it was unnecessary for Moshe to remind Israel not to choose the curse. When God says "I have put before you blessing and curse" (Deut. 11:26), curse is simply the word used for "forgetting your way." It is called a curse because it is the opposite of a blessing, which is what happens when you remember your values (Toledot Yaakov Yosef, Re'eh 45).

From the youngest to the oldest, never is there an age when we are unencumbered by the burden of discernment: which school, which job, which house; leap or stay where you are. This is all the more real for us in a continuously historic epoch in which inconstancy is our only constant. How do we maintain our focus in the midst of the noise around us? How do we make sure we are on the right path when there are so many doors opening loudly everywhere we turn? Don't mistake the answer's simplicity for ease of execution. *Walk your path, revere it, observe, heed, and act. Then stick to it, keep your goals close, and don't let even your most trusted voices lead you astray.* (Rabbi Rami Schwartz, Founder of the [Den Collective in Washington, DC](#))

[Haftarah: God's Promise of Hope by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein \(from the archives\).](#)

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The nation stood at a moment of great trepidation and insecurity. The Babylonians had exiled most of its citizens. Those remaining in Judea were disheartened, their homeland devastated. The people were desperate for hope. God's message, in the latter part of the book of Isaiah, was meant to meet this religious challenge. His message was dramatic. It raised the ante of God's promises to a new level, providing people with the requisite hope to meet the demands which faced them in order to rebuild the nation.

This is the message which God, metaphorically, offered free of charge: "Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water, even if you have no money; come buy food and eat; buy food without money, wine and milk without cost." (55:1) The implications

of this message were spelled out a few lines later. In the past, God had made a covenant with the nation through its king. David, king of Israel, was guaranteed his royal line in perpetuity. This promise gave the Davidic line its strength to continue to lead the nation. (See 2 Sam. 7:16) Isaiah, in his message, changed the focus of this covenant: "Incline your ear and come to Me; Hearken and you shall be revived, and I shall make with you an everlasting covenant, the enduring loyalty promised to David." (55:3) The strength of the Davidic covenant was transferred from the monarchy to the entire nation, in lieu of the fall of the monarchy at Babylonian hands. (Psalm 89 reflects the religious angst caused by this event. See, in particular verse 39-46)

The transfer of God's political covenant from the monarchy to the people as a whole represented a radical move toward the democratization of God's promise. The people as a whole now served as God's medium for carrying out His mission in the world. This change coincided with similar changes in the religious realm. (See Isaiah ch. 56) (Prof. Shalom Paul, *Isaiah 40-66, Mikra L'Yisrael*, pp. 393-395. What are we to make of these radical changes? The theological changes represented here illustrate certain reevaluations necessitated by the destruction of the First Temple and decimation of Judean national life caused by the seventy years of Babylonian exile. Since the monarchy no longer existed, the people took over the role of the monarchy as the harbingers of God's will. They, therefore, needed God's encouragement to carry forward His mission. This transformation ultimately distinguished Judaism from other religions. It planted the seed that transformed Judaism into a religion where all of its members are players, where every individual bears responsibility and is an active participant in carrying out God's will.

Yahrzeits

Debra Grossman remembers her father Jordon Brown (Yacov Ben William) on Monday August 17th (Av27).