

D'var Torah
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Parashah Re'eh
Deuteronomy 11:26-12:28
28 Av 5774 · Aug. 24, 2014
Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Shabbat Shalom. As always, it is an honor to *daven* with you this morning; thank you for your spirit.

This week's *parashah* is *Re'eh*, named for the first word of the portion, the command form of the verb "to see". This is a busy Torah portion which establishes some important foundations for the Jewish people. Many of these critical principles come later in the triennial cycle and I am going to work backwards. In later passages Moses discusses worship in a central place (12:1 - 12:28), prohibitions against idol worship (12:29 - 13:19), our chosen-ness to be a light to all nations (14:2), dietary restrictions and allowances (14:3 - 14:21), debt forgiveness and *shmitah*, the sabbatical year (15:1 - 15:11), treatment of slaves (15:12 - 15:18), and the pilgrim festivals of Pesach, Shavout, and Sukkot (16:16).

So what happens in this, the first triennial reading cycle? I am going to focus on the first two verses and give the Reader's Digest version of the remaining 35 verses. You'll see the point in a moment but first some text and context. I'll keep it short since I only have an hour.

At the end of our wandering the Israelites are told they (we) are about to cross the Jordan and enter and possess the land which the Lord our God has assigned to them (us). Here, we are told to destroy the altars of the false gods that inhabit *Eretz Yisrael*. You can craft a *d'var Torah* on the admonition in 12:8 to not act in Israel as we have done in exile where every person acted as they pleased. You craft a clear and contemporary *d'var Torah* on the grant of safety and security we are given in Israel in 12:10. Then there is the discussion of animal sacrifices, the spoliation of animal blood, and the consuming of flesh. Yum! And then there is the command, *re'eh*, see, when the Israelites are not shown anything but they are supposed to listen, *sh'ma*. I will leave all those issues for you to ponder another time. Today, I will talk about today. *Ha'yom*.

When you look at the first two verses of this parashah the word “ha’yom” (today) is mentioned twice. As we know from our Torah study, when words are repeated in short order, that repetition is important.

רֵאֵה אֲנֹכִי נֹתֵן לִפְנֵיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה.

Re’eh anochi noten lifneychem hayom berachah uk’lalah.

See, this day I set before you a blessing and a curse.

אֶת-הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמָעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם.

Et-hab’rachah asher tishme’u el-mitzvot Adonay Eloheychem asher anochi metzaveh etchem hayom.

Blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day.

If you took out the word “today”, Moses’ words to *Am Yisrael*, the people of Israel, would be as just as strong and certainly as meaningful. Moses could have just said “see, I give you a blessing and a curse”, and, “you get a blessing if you obey God’s commandments.” That’s pretty good. But Moses said today twice. What’s up with that?

Our ancestors were given a preview that they would soon ascend the mountains of blessings and curses, Mounts Gerizim and Ebal. As our ancestors before us, we are on a journey too.

Today we ready to cross in to the month of Elul where, as is our tradition, we begin the process of introspection. This is the time to pre-pent. Elul arises in a few days and during the 29 days of this, our six month, it is our tradition to use each day – every today – to challenge ourselves to grow and heal. All of this work leads up to the first day of the seventh month, Rosh Hashanah, a new year; a new beginning. Just as our ancestors are preparing in this parashah to finally enter the Promised Land, we are preparing for what could also be our promised land. Although each of our own Egypts can differ.

This week there are many twos. There are two mountains, and there are two outcomes of our actions – blessings or curses. And in a few weeks we are reminded that God has two thrones. On Rosh Hashanah God sits on the throne of judgment and on Yom Kippur God moves to the throne of mercy. There are grammatical but asymmetrical twos, too. Re'eh is a command in the singular for us as one nation of Israel to see, but *lifneichem*, before you, is plural reminding us that the covenant binds us each individually.

Today, ha'yom, is the day for us to prepare to meet God, our fellow man, and ourselves. A perfect God made us imperfect and The Holy One is merciful in that, for the sake of our covenant with Him, God can see past our imperfections, if we repent, pray, and bring justice. *U'teshuvah, u'tefilah, u'tzedakah ma'aveereen et roa hag'zeera.*

The Chasidic scholar, Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter (z"l), better known as *Sefat Emet*, lived in Poland in the second half of the 19th Century. He looked at the two todays in Re'eh and noted that Moses pointed out in the present that he would later be sending our ancestors to the two mountains, for blessings and curses. Sefat Emet opined that this a-temporal orientation is actually neatly aligned. He said that the blessings and curses that fall today are tied to the sanctifications and sins committed before. In Hebrew, *middah k'neged middah*; measure corresponding to measure. In common English; what comes around, goes around. In slang, Karma is a ... difficult or unpleasant situation or thing.

As I stand here today I can look back in to the past, perhaps looking backward in to disorder from this day of curses. On another today perhaps I see peace ahead of me from a day of blessings, to which I can look forward. Maybe these two todays are the same day, just as I sit in the same seat in my car I have both a windshield and a rearview mirror.

If numerology is your thing, the second word in this parashah is *anochi*, or I. Gematrians find the same numerical value in *anochi* as they do in *chair*, *kesay*. Is this chair the chair you or I sit in today? Is it God's chair? Or maybe it is the throne of judgment or the throne of mercy.

Moses returns to the today theme later in Deuteronomy (30:15, 19) when he reiterates the first two verses of this parashah and adds to it. Moses said "See, I set before you today life and the good, death and the bad...Today I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life so you and your children after you may live."

My father likes to say “today is the first day of the rest of your life.” I often laugh at that, but while it was often said in jest, at its core it’s true: Every day, *kol yomim*, can be the first day of the rest of the rest of my life and maybe yours, too. Moses told us – twice -- that we can make today and every day a blessing or a curse. Like our earth, and our Torah, and our braided candles, and round challah, we turn and turn again. We abuse, we betray and we are cruel, but every day – every today -- we can reach for our better selves. I know this is easy to say and much harder to do.

In Latin, *carpe diem*; seize the day. In Hebrew, *im lo ach’shav ehmatah?* If not now, when?

The choices for us are clear: blessings or curses, hatred or love, good or bad, kindness or cruelty.

To borrow a *daf*, a page, from a New York rabbi I met last year, I would like to be audacious enough to offer to you, my friends and my extended family, a blessing. I hope you will be gracious enough to offer to me a blessing in return. I bid you a good and meaningful Elul. As we turn the calendar back to the beginning, and we leave whatever Egypt in which we have been, I hope we all can repair whatever might be broken, and that we can heal wounds that may have opened. I pray that today, and every day, we can do justice, love goodness, and walk modestly with our God. If not now, when? There is no better day than today. Ha’yom.

Hodesh tov, Shabbat Shalom, v’Shalom Aleichem.