

**Parashat Re'eh**  
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Shabbat Shalom.

In 1907, a young woman named Sarah Dvorah Tabatchnikov left the Pale of Settlement in Russia to come to America. Worried about the waves of anti-Jewish pogroms that swept across Russia, Sarah's parents, who had 8 children, first sent Sarah's brother, Hayim Anschul, to distant relatives in America and Sarah was to follow. When she reached Vienna, a processing point along the way, she inexplicably developed an eye condition, perhaps an allergic reaction. With her eyes visibly swollen, the authorities in Vienna deemed her too unhealthy to continue on, and sent her back to Russia. As mysteriously as it had arrived, her eye condition cleared up; it was a twist of fate that changed the course of her life. Sarah soon met a young man named Moshe Mordinson, they married in 1910, and raised 6 children. Sarah and Moshe were my maternal grandparents, and the fifth of their six children was my mother, Sima.

I never met my grandmother, but throughout my life, my mother would talk with great admiration about the integrity and wisdom of her mother, and she'd quote her when a situation called for it. One quote in particular sticks with me -- whenever I was out of sorts, maybe disappointed over something, my mother would say: "You have a choice, you can either choose to look up or look down." She would explain, "there will always be people who are better off than you, and those less fortunate than you." Implicit in this was 'Recognize and see what you have.' Over time, I felt my mother added a second meaning; the choice to look up or down was about character and values, and who you want to be. In either case, I think what my grandmother and mother were saying is that, while we can't control our fate, how we choose to see a situation affects the quality of our lives.

Which brings me to this week's parsha, Re'aye. The parsha begins shortly before the Israelites cross the Jordan to enter Canaan, the land God has chosen for them. Moses presents the Israelites with a choice; He says: "Re'aye -- See, 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 ...." In presenting them with this choice, Moses' first words shape the context for the rest of the parsha. The parsha outlines a wide range of laws which will govern the



Israelites' lives in their new land. By putting these laws into the moral context of choosing a blessing or a curse, Moses gives the laws meaning, rather than delivering to them a dry list of instructions. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says of great leaders that they “*frame reality for the group. They define its situation, specify its aims, articulate its choices, ... and help us see why we should choose this route not that. That is one of their most magisterial roles, and no one did it more powerfully than did Moses in the book of Deuteronomy.*”

The laws Moses outlines for the Israelites introduce new practices and their breadth and scope are impressive. For example, how and where the Israelites will worship shifts away from their then current practice of having multiple local sanctuary sites. Moses directs them to prepare for and establish only one sanctuary site chosen by God. The laws list appropriate types of sacrificial offerings and other ritual contributions; address the slaughter of non-sacrificial animals for food, and list which animals, birds, and fish may be eaten and which not. Importantly, another group of laws recognizes that there will always be those in need in the community. Examples include making portions of crops available for those who have fallen on hard times; rules on providing debt relief without focusing on how or whether a debt will be repaid. There are even rules on how the Israelites should treat their fellow Israelite slaves who serve them, including offering them freedom in the 7th year of service. I should note that this parsha refers to both male and female Israelite slaves -- a first for acknowledging female slaves ... though they all are still slaves.

Repeated over and over throughout the parsha, Moses reinforces for the Israelites the notions of loyalty to God and that by following these laws, the Israelites will be blessed; doing what is good and right in the eyes of God, they and the generations after them will flourish.

When I read through the parsha, I found myself returning to its first words - the choice of blessing or curse presented by Moses, and the first instructions Moses gave the Israelites to prepare for their new place of worship.

Moses instructs: “You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshiped their gods, whether on lofty mountains and on hills or under any luxuriant tree. Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site.”

Harsh, right? From today's perspective, destroying the Canaanites' worship sites is abhorrent. Just think about the reverse, God forbid, happening to our synagogues, or just think about our own history.

Various commentators point out that the Israelites were a fledgling nation entering for the first time a land given to them by God, after wandering in exile for so long. God had good reason for concern that the new nation could be influenced or lured by other practices that may seem attractive. After all, they were an unruly bunch at times, and there was the episode with the golden calf, so their track record didn't exactly inspire confidence. Worship sites located on a lofty mountain or by a luxuriant tree could pose a potential threat to the Israelites to stray from God's laws. Therefore, any trace of idolatry and paganism had to be eliminated, "obliterating their name from that site."

The commentaries suggest further that this might be viewed in the context of a parent-child relationship; the Etz Hayim commentary says the Israelites are like an adolescent -- still young, but maturing. God wants to create a circumstance for the Israelites to have the right tools and environment for a good and just life, a life of blessings. God provides guidance through laws about how they are to live, which he tries to encourage through a kind of carrot and stick approach, but He also tries to eliminate risks or enticements that could thwart their success. And from there, it's their choice. On a much much more mundane level, it's a little like the kind of advice tips in magazine articles to help you stay on track that suggest, "sleep in your gym clothes so that it's easy to get up and exercise first thing in the morning," or "avoid purchasing large containers of treats and buy individually packaged ones" -- in other words, set up circumstances when possible to help us get where we want to go, and we're more likely to make the right choices.

But what if the steps necessary for the Israelites to stay on the right path, and that are good and protective for the fledgling nation, inflict harm on others? Is it ever appropriate to cause harm to someone else when protecting yourself or preserving what is yours?

In the law, it is. For example, causing physical harm to another is an assault and battery or, depending on the circumstances, it may be justified as a reasonable act to protect against an imminent harm.

Is that what is happening in this parsha? Is there an actual imminent harm caused by another? Or is the perceived imminent harm a fear of being enticed? Does the

goal of doing everything possible to ensure that the Israelites stay on the just and right path to bring them blessings justify destroying Canaanite worship sites?

After searching for an answer to this question, I settled on one provided by a 14-year-old girl named Ayelet Shuster from Hyman Brand Hebrew Academy in Overland Park, Kansas who wrote in 2016: “In the Torah, the times were different and the Israelites thought what they were doing was ethical. But in the modern world it’s completely different.” Perhaps Ayelet is right in a sense; there was a different context and moral code in that time, and probably a brutal life and death day to day existence, so maybe like many things, it’s complicated.

But for us in the modern world, the parsha brings into focus this question: When is it reasonable to believe you’re being threatened by someone else such that it’s acceptable to cause them harm to protect yourself or live as you believe is right?

I want to point out again that the parsha encourages consideration of others; it directs the Israelites to look out for the welfare of others in their community who are less fortunate. But why take their interests into consideration but not the Canaanites? Perhaps the difference is that these “others” are individuals the Israelites “see” up close in their communities. They live with and among them. When we don’t see the “others,” it may be easier to avoid understanding that they may be just like us, and it becomes easier not to think about the impact of our choices on them.

Protecting what is ours or acting in a way that we believe is right even at the expense of others. These themes are so relevant to today; different groups feel threatened by others, with fears of change either happening too quickly or not happening at all. We might fear that one change in either direction is the first step on a slippery slope. Are these reasonable fears? And what is the cost to others?

So, I certainly don’t have any answers. But as we all know, Jews have had a long history of being the other, the outsider. in so many different places and times in history. This may sound a little simplistic, but I believe if you’ve had any experience where you’ve been an outsider, it takes very little imagination to understand and “see” the experience of another outsider. So, if a choice will impact or harm others, that has to factor into the analysis. Just a little imagination should do it.

Finally, on a personal note, I want to share a story about blessings, a story about my mother, Sima. As some of you know, she passed away nearly a year ago, and

I've recently finished my official period of mourning. My mother was in every sense of the word, a blessing in our lives. The day after she passed away, I went to Shabbat services at the synagogue I grew up in, Temple Beth Hillel-Beth El in Wynnewood, PA, and heard this story firsthand. While of course I was familiar with it, my Mom left out a few details.

“When my mother turned 75, she decided that she wanted to have the experience for the first time in her life of going to a mikveh. The synagogue had just completed building one, and though she remembered as a little girl accompanying her mother, Sarah Dvora, she had never been to one herself. When she arrived at the mikveh, she met her friend, Laurie, who was/is the rabbi's wife and a volunteer there. Laurie was struck by my mother's curiosity and willingness to have this new experience at age 75. Laurie told her that people come for many reasons, including during significant and meaningful events in their lives, some wonderful and some painful. My mother said she was going into the mikveh feeling grateful for what she had and so blessed for her children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Knowing my mother's difficult life journey and the losses she suffered, Laurie marveled at her appreciation. So when my mother came out of the mikveh, Laurie asked her what she took away from her first experience. My mother replied, "it's not what I took away. It's what I left there -- I left some blessings for others who need them."

To sum up, in the words of my imahot, we have a choice to look up or look down. May we make good choices and, in doing so, be mindful of the effects on others. And may our choices enable us to both receive blessings and give blessings to others who need them.

Shabbat shalom.