

Re'eh: "Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; the blessing, if ye shall hearken unto the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day" (Deut 11:26-27)

This week's Torah portion ראה (the Hebrew word for 'See', and the first word of the *parasha*), Moses continues the farewell speech that he began in the first lines of Deuteronomy. However the difference between the two portions is that now, Moses is not rebuking the Children of Israel but rather, he begins with a very fundamental concept in Judaism, the freedom of choice. Moses states: *"See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse; the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you this day, and the curse if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God..."* (11:26-28). Moses, knowing that soon he will be parting ways with the Children of Israel, gives them also these words of guidance:

אלה החקים והמשפטים אשר תשמרון לעשות בארץ אשר נתן ה' אלקי אבתיך לך לרשתה

"These are the statutes and the laws which you shall guard and do in the land that the Lord God of your forefathers, has to possess..."(12:1).

The rules of שמיטה, the sabbatical year, are also repeated and one of these rules is that all loans and debts are to be suspended in the seventh year and one should not refrain from loaning money to one's friend simply because the seventh year is approaching and thus he may not be repaid.

So *Parasha Re'eh* is a mixture of directives and laws of which some are deeply humanitarian like forgiving or suspending loans, or releasing the Jewish slaves. BUT we (and they) also have to deal with with the difficult and dark directive whereby the Children of Israel were commanded to obliterate all the places where the nations worshiped their gods, commanding them:

ושברתם את מצבתם ואשריהם תשרפו באש ופסלי אליהם תגדעון ואבדתם את שמם מן המקום ההוא

"You shall tear down their altars and break their pillars ..." (12:3).

I always find myself angry and confused when I read this passage and it reminds me of the issues we are currently experiencing with the destruction of statues of historical figures. Will that change attitudes or better the lives of those who are discriminated against? Did the destruction of ancient monuments by the Taliban better the lives of people in Afghanistan or elsewhere? or indeed change lives and bring the much needed and desired change?

I feel that Moses's words urging people to such wanton destruction, and coming from the mouth of such a humanitarian leader, was wrong and quite frankly unacceptable. Whilst we are not told how the people reacted to this commandment I can only hope that many opposed it. As I was unhappy what I read I was searching whether there was another, and hopefully compassionate and humanitarian INTERPRETATION to this inhuman and unacceptable directive. I was delighted when I managed to find an answer which in part satisfied my desire to know what may have been behind this law. I found it when reading Rashi's, an 11/12th Century French commentator of the Hebrew Bible and *Talmud* quoting an interpretation given by Rabbi Ishmael whose note of explanation is found in a Sifre commentary, redacted between 200 and 500 CE. Rabbi Ishmael wrote: "*Would it enter your mind that the Israelites would tear down the altars [of God]? Rather, his interpretation is "You shall not do so". The inference is 'you should not do like the deeds of the nations so that your sins would cause the sanctuary of your fathers to be destroyed.'* Thus he believed the words of the *Torah* were there to be a warning not to be idol worshipers, but that the Children of Israel be faithful to God. So in many ways I sighed with relief as Rabbi Ishmael was closer to the period of Moses than I am and thus understanding this passage better. It was also more satisfactory that Rashi has leaned towards this interpretation and understanding.

The verse as well as the background to this week's Torah portion is the notion of 'Freedom of Choice'. It is that freedom which helps us not to be slaves to either destructive or positive ideas or commands, exercising our freedom of choice in such a way that we are able to demonstrate our humanity. The choices gives us many possibilities and it remains important that we exercise them for the benefit of the world and fellow human beings. The expression in the Torah '*Love your neighbour as yourself*' which appears only once in

Chapter 19 of Leviticus is an indicator as to which direction we should be going, because for all religions this commandment is central to their beliefs.

My hope and prayer is that the Jewish people follow the sentiments expressed by Isaiah, and that together with all humanity, we all take to heart responsibility for ourselves and for each other:

"I the LORD have called unto you in righteousness, and have taken hold of your hand, and submitted you as the people's covenant, as a light unto the nations" Isaiah (42:6). "And unto your light, nations shall walk, and kings unto the brightness of your rising" (Isaiah 60:3).

Shabbat Shalom

B'Shalom

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