

Parashat Re'eh: The Message is Uplifting, the Wording is Not!

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Dear Friends,

This week's parasha invites us to know another aspect of the God of the ancient Israelites, the God through whom it is possible to choose love. The parasha is Re'eh, and it begins this way:

"Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse; the blessing, if you shall hearken unto the commandments of the LORD your God, which I command you this day; and the curse, if you shall not hearken unto the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which you have not known." (Deuteronomy 11, 26-28)

I can already hear the murmurs: Are blessing bestowed only on those who follow God's commandments and those who don't are cursed?!

Good question. But It gets even worse!

"These are the statutes and the ordinances, which you shall observe to do in the land which the LORD, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess it, all the days that you live upon the earth. You shall surely destroy all the places wherein the nations that you are to dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every leafy tree. And you shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; and you shall hew down the graven images of their gods; and you shall destroy their name out of that place." (12:1-4)

This chapter is so not politically correct, that perhaps it would be better forgotten. Aren't there enough reasons to hate the Jews and boycott us without publicizing some of our darker texts?

Here is a little more:

"If there arise in the midst of you a prophet, or a dreamer of dreams--and he gives you a sign or a wonder, and the sign or the wonder comes to pass, whereof he spoke to you--saying: 'Let us go after other gods, which you have not known, and let us serve them... that prophet, or that dreamer of dreams, shall be put to death; because he has spoken perversion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to draw you aside out of the way which the LORD your God commanded you to walk in. So shall you put away the evil from the midst of you.'" (13:2-6)

True, the language is harsh and the punishments sound like they were written by ISIS extremists... But,

I would like to suggest that behind these impolite and difficult words we are looking at one of the most enlightened and advanced parashot in the Torah.

Join me with an open heart and mind as I explain.

Enlightenment may be found at the end of the last paragraph quoted. The following sentence is, in fact, the central motif of the parasha:

"...he has spoken perversion against the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and redeemed you out of the house of bondage, to draw you aside out of the way which the LORD your God commanded you to walk in."

Who is this zealous God that the entire Torah is asking us to listen to? Who is the God who is the source of the promised blessing?

This God is mainly two things: the God of freedom and the God of the heart!

The God of Freedom – this is the motif that appears repeatedly, and is actually the message of the entire Torah: The God of Israel is the God of Freedom. He is the "power" that elevates a person's soul from the narrow, difficult and dark places we find ourselves in. The God of the Israelites is the hidden power (hidden because it is internal, not accessible to the naked eye) that redeems a person from everything he or she is enslaved to. He is so hidden that most people cannot see Him, and thus is unable to follow Him, and remain enslaved most of their lives to alien gods - empty pursuits, social fears, cultural norms and expectations.

Indeed, the God of freedom appears clearly in the first two of the Ten Commandments, in Exodus 20: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the Land of Egypt" and "you will not have any other God before Me."

Anything that enslaves you, reduces you, is an "other God" - precisely the god that this parasha is warning us against. This warning is entirely appropriate for most of us, and it certainly was in earlier times. The God of freedom is so elusive, whereas the gods of money, status, youth, health, intelligence, and so on are always more attractive to us. In the modern age freedom and liberty sound so natural and right, yet even 60 or 70 years ago, not to mention earlier, full obedience to this God was a very risky business.

Baruch Spinoza, the 17th century Dutch philosopher, preferred to stick to his beliefs and his freedom, and paid dearly for his choice. He was completely

excommunicated. How ironic, that more than any other Jew in Amsterdam at that time, he was the most loyal to the God of freedom. Spinoza, in fact, was the only "true Jew" in his city, and his fellow "observant" Jews couldn't stand it. Like Avraham in his youth (according to the Midrash), and like Moshe at the beginning of his life (as a young fighter for freedom and justice), Spinoza was banished and banned.

Freedom is core value in the parasha. Here are a few brief examples:

"And you shall remember that you were a bondman in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you (15:15)

Observe the month of Aviv, and keep the Passover unto the LORD your God; for in the month of Aviv the LORD your God brought you forth out of Egypt by night. (16:1) And you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and the Levite that is within your gates, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are in the midst of you, in the place which the LORD your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there. And you shall remember that you were a bondman in Egypt; and you shall observe and do these statutes." (16:11-12)

The God of the Heart: the second quality that seems apparent of this ancient Hebrew God is that he demands that we listen to and be exclusively loyal to a very personal, inner God. Wherever it says "listen", it is followed by the words "your God", or "follow the commandments of your God". The prohibition is against following other gods, i.e. the gods of others. He is theirs, not yours! In other words, don't be tempted to follow the path of another person. Certainly don't follow blindly. Be truthful to your path, to your God, to your inner voice. The rule seems to be: someone else's god is my idol. What a revolutionary, postmodern notion!

The voice of "YOUR God" is the voice that calls out to each individual from their own burning bush.

In a few weeks we will read the following radical statement in Parashat Nitzavim: "For this commandment which I command you this day... is not far off. It is not in heaven... Neither is it beyond the sea... But the word is very close to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it." (30:11-14)

The toughest challenge in a person's life will always be to remain loyal to the God of freedom and to listen to one's own true inner God - to be loyal to that which speaks from deep within! Even today, in the 21st century, a time of so much external freedom; when we can choose who and what to believe – it is so difficult. All the more so 3400 years ago, or even just 100 years ago.

This explains the Torah's use of such forthright wording.

Parashat Re'eh opens with the promise of a wonderful blessing, but it has a cost. It demands of us to choose freedom and commit ourselves to it. Freedom on its own is not enough, but it enables us to take the next step, to listen, to pay attention, to the voice of God within us; to filter out the noise of an endless number of other gods.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha