



Parashat Ki Tetzeh: Freedom From Comparison

Dear Friends,

Parashat Ki Tetzeh is full of instructions for the foundation of an ethical society; one that is empathetic and just. Some of the directives are wondrous, and some are hard for the modern, Western ear, and require explanation or adaptation.

I wish to focus on one directive this time, a mitzvah which I find deeply touching: **“You shall not plow with the ox and the ass together”** (D'varim 22:10)

On the face of it, this instruction is very clear and simple: mules and oxen have different abilities. It would be abusive to expect them to pull together. The mule would lag behind and be trampled while the ox would end up pulling the entire burden, including the mule itself.

But there is another layer of meaning here.

The thought that an ox and a mule can be hitched up to the same plow does not take their different natures into consideration.

Every creature - plant, animal, human being - is unique.

“...humans stamp many coins with one seal and they are all like one another; but the King of kings, the Holy Blessed One, has stamped every human with the seal of the first man, yet not one of them are like another.” (Mishna Nezikin, Masechet Sanhedrin 4:5)

Humans made coins look alike because we are hooked on comparisons: we compare ourselves to others; we compare ourselves today to what we were like in the past; we compare others to an accepted social standard; we compare a student's test results with the class average; we compare height, weight, IQ, beauty, kindness... everything. Sometimes it seems as if there is nothing that we do not compare. In fact, our very gaze is one of comparison. Even the sunset causes us to think: “Wow, this sunset is so beautiful. Isn't it like the one we saw on our vacation in Greece... well, not quite, there it was a little more beautiful,” or “there are no sunsets like Israeli sunsets anywhere in the world.”

The human brain, which is amazing and very limited at the same time, is used to measuring, weighing, and evaluating. Measurements are the tool with which we assess ourselves and others in every dimension.

Every expectation we have is the result of a comparison. It originates in another experience, one that we heard about or saw in a brochure and wish to experience. Will our experience measure up to the brochure? It, in turn, creates another string of comparisons. Perhaps our expectation is the result of an experience we once had ourselves, and now wish to repeat exactly, or even to improve upon.

But these comparisons make us miserable! We always measure and are being measured against something or someone else. We live under the tyranny of grades, and grades are always given in relation to other people, to the norm determined by someone else, to the measurements which seem to us to be oracular.

Parashat Ki Tetzeh reminds us that an ox and a mule cannot be hitched to the same plow because they are different creatures, and therefore cannot be compared. True, they are both animals; they both serve to plow land. They can even be categorized similarly, just as the gold from which coins are minted may be the same, and every human being is made up of the same molecules and atoms. But in fact, in contrast to those coins, human beings are all entirely different from one another.

No two fingerprints are ever the same. Not even those of identical twins.

Is it possible, then, to abstain from making comparisons?

I don't think so. Comparing is a basic mechanism of the operating system of the frontal cortex in the human brain which gives us precedence in the natural world. Comparing is the matrix that we are imprisoned in.

But with a degree of awareness, it is possible to reduce somewhat the grip comparison has on us. Just by remembering that comparing is entirely artificial. It is "only" a mechanism in our brain, nothing more. It has nothing whatsoever to do with reality. Reality just is. It does demand any comparison.

Furthermore, the information we get from the process of comparison - whether flattering or humiliating, helpful or not, advancing or limiting - is entirely fictional. It is a very impressive human invention.

Everything appears differently when we take off our "comparing" glasses. It is not necessarily more beautiful (because this too would be a comparison), but it is clearer (yes, this too is a comparison), fresher, more compassionate, more open to reality, and to the infinite shades within it.

Shabbat Shalom,
Elisha