

Selected Shorts: Re'eh - Number 42

Rabbi Eliot Malomet 29 Av 5782 August 7, 2021

דברים י"א:כ"ו

(כו) ראה אנכי נתן לפניכם היום ברכה וקללה:

Deuteronomy 11:26

(26) See, this day I set before you **blessing and curse**: Moses introduces one of the key themes of Deuteronomy: all of life is a choice. Here he points to Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival as the loci of *blessing and curse* but those are simply convenient external geographical markers of the internal spiritual landscape in all people. This is the Torah's way of articulating a deep moral truth: life is not predetermined; each of us has the freedom to choose between *blessing and curse, good and evil, life and death*. (Deut. 30:14, 19)

דברים י"א:כ"ח

(כח) וסקללה אם לא תשמעו אל מצות ה' אלקיכם וסרתם מויתורך אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום ללכת אחרי אלקים אחרים אשר לא ידעתם: {ס}

Deuteronomy 11:28

(28) and **curse**, if you do not obey the commandments of the LORD your God, **but turn away from the path** that I enjoin upon you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced. Moses' greatest fear is that the people will **turn from the path of God**. In his last speech to them (31:19) he predicts this outcome. *the path of God* is a metaphor that goes all the way back to Abraham. God selects Abraham out of a sense that Abraham will be able to instruct his descendants to **keep the path of God, doing what is just and right** (Gen. 18:19).

דברים י"ב:ה'

(ה) כי אם-אלהי-המלואם אשר יבחר ה' אלהיכם מקל-שבטיכם לשום את-שמו שם לשכנו תדרשו וקאת שמה:

Deuteronomy 12:5

(5) but look only to **the site that the LORD your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation, to establish His name there**. There you are to go – we cannot overstate the significance of a central location for the worship of God. One place of pilgrimage unites the people under one system, one authority, one way and One God. Recall that the tribes will settle different territories once they cross the Jordan. It will take a couple of centuries of war with the land's other inhabitants and finally, the emergence of David for the tribes to coalesce and for a capital to be chosen. The Temple will be built

under Solomon. Up until that point, the shrine will be located in several different places. God's name "resides" in the Temple. The "House of God" and the "Name of God" are synonymous.

דברים י"ב:ה'

(ה) לא תעשון לכל אשר אנחנו עשים פה היום איש כלי-הישר בעיניו:

Deuteronomy 12:8

(8) You shall not act at all as we now act here, **every man doing what is right in his eyes** – the religious system is not determined by individuals. Biblical religion is not an idiosyncratic expression of individual tastes. Judaism conflicts with the radical individualism that defines our age.

דברים י"ב:כ"ח

(כח) לא תאכלגו למען יטב לך ולבניך אחריך כיי-מעשה הישר בעיני ה':

Deuteronomy 12:25

(25) you must not partake of it, in order that it may go well with you and with your descendants to come, for you will be doing **what is right in the eyes of God**. Back to the idea of choice. How does one choose the proper way to live? By following what is right in your own eyes, or by following what is right in God's eyes?

דברים י"ג:ב'

(ב) כיי-קום בקרבך נביא או חלם חלום ונתן אליך אות או מופת:

Deuteronomy 13:2

(2) If there appears among you a prophet or a dream-diviner and he gives you a sign or a portent – the false prophet manipulates your decision making through charisma, magic, and signs. The Torah sees great danger in such an individual; he (or she) will at first wow you and then usurp your moral autonomy. Worse, that individual will lead you to idolatry.

דברים י"ג:ה'

(ה) אחרי ה' אלקיכם תלכו ואתו תיראו ואת-מצותיו תשמרו ובקלו תשמעו ואתו תעבדו וכו' תדבקו:

Deuteronomy 13:5

(5) **Follow none but the LORD your God, and revere none but Him; observe His commandments alone, and heed only His orders; worship none but Him, and hold fast to Him**. How exactly are you to follow God? R. Hama son of R. Hanina taught that following God means to follow God's attributes. Just as God clothes the naked, so

should you clothe the naked. Just as God visits the sick and comforts the bereaved, so should you. (Sotah 14a)

דברים י"ג:ט"ו

(טו) ודרשתי וחקרת ושאלת היטב והגה אמת נכון הדבר ונעשתה התועבה הזאת בקרבך:

Deuteronomy 13:15

(15) you shall investigate and inquire and interrogate thoroughly. If it is true, the fact is established—that abhorrent thing was perpetrated in your midst— Reading these texts we have to remember that in Deuteronomy, idolatry is the worst possible sin an individual or a community can commit. Idolatry is an entire ideological structure in which numerous deities control the natural rhythms of life and command constant adherence and service. In these systems, the cult exerts almost total control over the individual; enslavement, sexual excess, and even murder in the form of human sacrifice is common. Idolatry is attractive and compelling because it offers simple answers to complex questions, (ie. bad things happen because there is a god for that), it is much more sensual, direct and body oriented; it offered concrete images of abstract notions and made very few intellectual demands on its adherents beyond imagining and perhaps imitating the lives of the deities. The verse above is directed towards individuals who try to ‘flip’ an entire community to idolatry, a capital offense. Note the three-verb progression. This verse is the basis of the body of rabbinic law regarding rigorous questioning in capital cases.

דברים י"ד:א'-ב'

(א) בנים אתם לה' אלקיכם ולא תשימו קרחה בין עיניכם למת:

Deuteronomy 14:1-2

(1) You are children of the LORD your God. You shall not gash yourselves or shave the front of your heads because of the dead. Death shatters us. Gashing and self-mutilation probably had pagan cultic significance as a response to death, but current research connects inflicting self-injury to the desire to validate deep emotional pain and possibly also to the desire to experience a kind of response-euphoria as a substitution for trauma. By reminding Israel that they are children to God, Moses invokes God’s unconditional parental love as the force that grounds an individual when faced with the excruciating trauma of death and bereavement. *lo titgodedu* -

You shall not gash yourselves – The Rabbis interpret this with an elaborate pun: לא תעשו אגודות אגודות – *lo ta'asu agudot agudot, do not divide yourselves into factions.* Argument, disagreement, and debate are basic features of rabbinic culture, but the world from which it emerged was rife with cataclysmic schisms arising from charismatics and “isms”.

(ב) כי עם קדוש אתה לה' אלקיך וברך בתר ה' להיות לך לעם סגולה מכל העמים אשר על פני האדמה:

(2) For you are a people consecrated to the LORD your God: the LORD your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people. We are reminded of the overture to the covenant in Exodus:

| Deut 14:2 | Exod. 19:5-6 |
|--------------------------|------------------------------|
| כי עם קדוש אתה לה' אלקיך | והייתם לי סגולה |
| ברך בתר ה' | מכל העמים |
| להיות לך לעם סגולה | כילי פלי הארץ: |
| מכל העמים | ואתם תהיו לי סגולה מכל העמים |
| אשר על פני האדמה | וגוי קדוש |

It is fascinating the way Deuteronomy re-fashions the earlier text from Exodus. In Exodus, **God** speaks directly to Israel in the 2nd person. In Deuteronomy **Moses** speaks to Israel in the 2nd person, and relates to God in the 3rd person. “Choice” is key to the world view of Deuteronomy; “Kingdom of Priests” is key to Exodus.

דברים ט"ו:י"א

(יא) כי לא יחדל אביון מקרב הארץ עליכם אנכי מצוה לאמר פתם תפתח את ידך לאחיה לעניו ולאביונו בארץ:

Deuteronomy 15:11

(11) For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land, which is why I command you: open your hand to the poor and needy kinsman in your land. Central to Deuteronomy’s political philosophy is that tending to the poor is the obligation of every individual not the state.

דברים ט"ז:י"ד

(יד) ושמתם בסגור אתם ובנה ובתו ובתו ועבדו ואמנה והלוי והגר והיתום והאלמנה אשר בשעריך:

Deuteronomy 16:14

(14) You shall rejoice in your festival, with your son and daughter, your male and female slave, the Levite, the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow in your communities. Joy is a mitzvah. For you and your family; your indentured servants suffering economic duress; the Levite and the foreigner who have no property; and the bereaved who have been crushed by tragedy. The right to joy belongs to everyone. *Shabbat Shalom!*