



## THE ALUMNI PERSPECTIVE

by Alexander Jefferson



### The Impact One Can Have

This week's *parsha*, *parshat Re'eh*, begins with a fascinating statement by *Hashem* to the Jewish people.

*"See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your G-d, that I commanded you today. And the curse: If you do not observe the commandments of the Lord, your G-d, and you stray from the path that I command you today, to go to other gods which you have not known."*

This is a rather perplexing statement. What does this mean? If I follow all your *mitzvot*...?! If I sin and stray to other G-ds...?! What?! Shouldn't there be an end to those sentences? That is like me proposing a trade with a friend of mine, "Hey, buddy, you see that watch of yours that I want? If you give me your watch." End of proposition. How does this make any sense? Where is the incentive for us to stay the path?

Next, we are told that when we enter the land of Israel, we shall obliterate all the inhabitants' places and utensils of idol worship including every last idol, alter, and image of their false gods.

The next verses tell us that we should seek *Hashem's* presence in the place where he tells us. At this location, we shall bring offerings, have feasts, and gather our whole families to rejoice in our accomplishments that came in the hand of *Hashem*. This place shall serve as a hub for *Hashem's* worship.

This juxtaposition of the verses raise some very interesting questions. First, why must we be so intent on annihilating the towns of those who inhabited the land first? The history of the early American settlers to this day is still wrapped up in controversy in the manner in which they treated the Indians. Is *Hashem* really telling us to do something similar? Must we come into a land where we had not previously been and wreak havoc? Why can't we just observe our

monotheism and worship *Hashem* where we want, and let them do as they choose where they want? What happened to “to each his own?”

Further, aren't the next *psukim* telling us to basically do what we are chastising the Canaanites for doing? We are so appalled that they use physical structures to worship. Yet, we are then told to worship at a specific place where we will erect a structure or building. What makes our center of G-d's presence so much better and more permissible than theirs? We worship and sacrifice to *Hashem* at a Temple with tablets inside. What is so different than them worshipping a god in a temple with a statue inside?

Back to our being told to obliterate those who worship false gods: The *parsha* continues in telling us never to hang around the people whose towns we just destroyed. And it even tells us that if someone from within our family – be it a parent, sibling, or child – dabbles in idol worship, we can no longer be around them either. What is going on here? Why must we run from any hint of difference?

And just to make matters even more confusing, the *parsha* goes on a rampage of spewing out some of the most important Jewish laws. In a matter of only a couple of columns in the *Torah*, the *parsha* manages to lay out for us the laws of *Kashrut*, the *Shmitah* year, a Hebrew slave, and the holiday of *Pesach* along with the subsequent *Omer*, and the holiday of *Shavuot*.

We are told that every *parsha* has a unique theme that runs throughout its text. What do all of these laws have in common? Why are we told to annihilate the inhabitants' villages? What is going on with an open-ended blessing and curse? And how in the world do each of these questions relate to the others?

Perhaps the answer lies in a few words towards the beginning of the *parsha* – words that one may not even pick up on in a first read. After we are told about this place of worship where we are going to revel in *Hashem's* presence, we are told all about the sacrifices that we are to give to him. The verse then continues to say that we should make the sacrifices **amongst a tribe**.

*This summer, I was a counselor for fourteen year-olds at a summer camp in California. This was my tenth summer at this camp and third on staff. In deciding about the summer, I felt nervous about what I was really doing going back to camp. I knew that I would have a great time, but fresh off of a year learning in a Yeshiva in the Old City of Jerusalem, I wasn't sure how high I ranked 'just having fun' on my priority list. Further, having attended the same camp for so many years, I have a sort of reputation there. I was worried about sinking back into the mold of the person I had been for so many years after undergoing so much personal change in my year at Yeshiva. I decided that if I went back to camp, I had to do my best to stand strong in the changes in my person and work my best to make a real impact this summer using the tools I had gained in the past year.*

*When I arrived at camp, I decided that my first task would be to give a drasha to the staff on the first Shabbat. I felt that too often Divrei Torah have a stigma of being long, boring, and delivering only the faintest of messages. I worked to ensure that my drasha was brief, captivating, and one with a message to which everyone could relate. After mincha, many people around camp came up to me and told me that they felt my short sermon was enlightening and*

*they asked me to continue teaching them, in some capacity, things I had learned in Israel.*

*I then spent a lot of time over the rest of the summer making myself available to the camp to share much of what I have learned in the realms of philosophies on G-d and Judaism, each week's parsha, the kabbala, ethics, and just simply life. I did my best to make myself accessible to campers and staff members alike. I taught a weekly staff class and, within my edah, gave many Divrei Torah, which lead to many in depth conversations instigated by my fourteen year old campers.*

Perhaps this *parsha* is really all about the way people can be influenced and how we must work to have a positive impact on others.

The *parsha* began by telling us to obliterate the utensils of those who worship idols and to distance ourselves from the inhabitants, as well as from any member of our family that may venture off to worship false gods. Perhaps we are being told to stay away from negative influences. It is not that these people are so bad. It is that if we are going to live in close quarters with others, we must do what we can to destroy the negative influences in our life, along with distancing ourselves from the people who may have that impact on us.

This is similar to contact with drugs. We shouldn't only destroy drugs with which we come in contact, but we should distance ourselves from those we know who use drugs. When hanging around the wrong crowd, you inevitably will be impacted. The *parsha* is teaching us that you must do all you can to remove yourself from negative influences.

This still begs the question of what is so different between their worshipping at a temple and ours? Is the modern day *Kotel* that much different than one of their idolatry trees, which we deem so terrible? Aren't both places where one would go to pray? Thus, aren't either both of them or neither of them idolatry? What makes the way we are told to worship *Hashem* so much different than the way they worship their gods?

The *Rambam* answers that idolatry is where the vehicle for bringing G-d into the world in itself becomes the goal. An item becomes an idol when we forget the source.

It is an amazing thing that people from all over the world gather to *daven* at the *Kotel*. However, if you think the *Kotel* is a wall that is going to answer your prayers, then that is idolatry. But if you *daven* there, or place notes there because it is a place that harbors monotheism and a united Judaism as well as a relationship with *Hashem*, then that is a whole different story.

The *Torah* tells us to rejoice and worship at a specific place right after we are told to destroy theirs because of the difference in what those places mean. For the Canaanites, an idol worshipping people, their temple was the goal. For the Jews, our Temple is about a place where we can be influenced by an overwhelmingly positive environment. We had to destroy their temples because idolatry is antithetical to the environment we are trying to create. They believed their temple was the source of everything and had the power to grant wishes. We built our Temple to create an environment to remind us that

*Hashem* is the source and the goal. Our Temple is just the vehicle and something to positively impact us.

And maybe this answer of the impact we can have on others is an underlying theme in the other important laws we learn in this week's *parsha*.

We are told that we must keep kosher, which entails only eating certain animals, killing them in a certain way, and avoiding their blood. One reason given for this is that we are trying to distance ourselves as much as possible from animalistic instincts as well as death. Perhaps *Kashrut* is mentioned here specifically because of the impact eating non-*Kosher* can have on our person as we may subconsciously be just a little more animal-like.

Next, we are told that every seventh year, we are to forgive all debts and be especially giving to people. Perhaps this is to teach us that if we are willing to lend the slightest help towards those not as financially well off, we can have a significant impact of their life. If we are miserly and remind them for tens of years about the debts they owe us, we can never know just how much we are wrecking their life. But if every seventh year, we turn to them with a smile and not only free them from their debt, but also give them a little more money or food, that gesture can go a long way in positively impacting their life and sense of self-worth. The *Shmitah* year teaches us how the slightest gestures can go the farthest way.

We are then told about how to handle the freeing of our *Eved Ivri*, Jewish slave. The Torah goes into further depth about what to do if the slave does not want to go. Why would a slave ever choose to remain in servitude? The *Torah* previously taught that we are to treat our Hebrew slave with the utmost respect, even going so far as to say that if we only have one pillow or one meal, we should give it to him. Perhaps this is mentioned here to tell us that when someone is directly under our influence, we should do all we can to ensure that we are providing him with the proper environment to grow positively.

Finally the *Torah* goes into detail about *Pesach*, the *Omer*, and *Shavuot*. Perhaps this is to teach us the juxtaposition between Egypt and getting the *Torah*. In Egypt, we were constantly surrounded by the terrible Egyptian culture. The *midrash* even goes so far as to say that the Jews were so impure in Egypt that had we gotten one level worse, *Hashem* would have abandoned us. *Hashem* took us out and gave us the *Torah*, the ultimate recipe to being positively influenced by our actions and positively impacting those around us, but not without a forty-nine-day buffer needed to remove ourselves from the negative influence within us.

Perhaps all of this is why the *Torah* tells us to make the sacrifice amongst a tribe. We are not to make it in a far removed place, but rather *amongst* the people, where the environment created around proper worship of *Hashem* can influence them.

Which brings us back to the first verses of the *parsha*. Why are we given a seemingly open-ended blessing and curse? Because when it comes to G-d, we are not rewarded *for* our actions; rather, we are rewarded *by* our actions. We are not going to be smitten for not having annihilated the idol worship amongst us; rather, we are going to be punished by the inevitable impact of

the negative influence. We are not given a set reward for rejoicing where *Hashem's* presence resides; rather, we are better positively impacted by the environment.

This extends perfectly back into the *parsha's* theme of the influence one can have. There is no punishment coming our way for acting improperly or sinning; we are only worse off for having blown the opportunity to be positive lights onto others. There is no gift for having positively impacted others; there is only the feeling of knowing that what you did was the right thing and others have positively benefited from your actions.

The challenge of *Parshat Re'eh* is for each of us to realize the impact that we have on other people – both positive and negative. We must find our strengths and work to share them with others. And most important of all, we must strive to have a positive influence on everyone around us at every moment of every day.

*Shabbat Shalom.*