

Torah Table Talk

Making Choices:

As Individuals and as a Community

Parshat Re'eh, Deut. 11:26 – 16:18

In Parshat Re'eh we review the laws that were originally presented to the Jewish people at Mount Sinai. Moses reviews the terms of God's covenant, speaking of the prohibition against idolatry and the commandment to build a sanctuary in the place that God would show them. He reviews the dietary laws and tells them to beware of false prophets and rebellious communities. He discusses the importance of helping the needy and tells the people to observe the three pilgrimage festivals. While many of these laws appear earlier in the Torah, some of them are considerably different than the earlier laws and some would appear to be completely new.

The Parshah opens with a powerful statement in which Moses tells the people to make responsible choices. Two futures lie before the Jewish people. It is up to the nation to choose the one they desire.

Deuteronomy 11:26

Behold (Re'eh) I am placing before you today a blessing and a curse... which the Lord your God commanded you.... When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and possess, you shall pronounce the blessing at Mount Gerezim, and the curse at Mount Ebal.

1. The opening verse of Parshat Re'eh sets a tone for the rest of Deuteronomy. What are the blessing and the curse of which Moses speaks in his overture? How is this pronouncement an appropriate introduction to the laws and commandments which he is about to present to the people?
2. The first word of this Torah Portion is Re'eh, which is translated as "Behold," but might better be translated as "look" or "see." Israel is told to see the blessing and curse. How is it possible for the people to see them? What is the connection between the blessings and curses and the two mountains?
3. Frequently in the opening chapters of Deuteronomy, Moses tells the people Sh'ma – to hear what God tells them to do. Why do you think he changes his choice of verbs from hearing to seeing at this point in his presentation? Are you a visual or an auditory learner? Do you learn better with your eyes, ears, or through activities?
4. Hebrew verbs are either singular or plural. In the opening verse in Parshat Re'eh, the opening verb is singular while the Hebrew word, "Lifneikhem," "before you" is plural. Shouldn't both words be either singular or plural? Why does Moses change person mid-sentence?

The Vilna Gaon: Why does the opening verse of Parshat Re'eh begin with a singular verb and conclude in the plural? This is to teach us that just because everyone else follows a particular path in life does not mean that it is necessarily the correct one. Rather each

person should take a good look (re'eh) at the path before him and then decide if it is the right one. The individual always comes before the community.

1. What does the Vilna Gaon have to say about following the popular or common path that most people follow? How does the verse in our Parshah discourage people from doing so?
2. To what extent should people get involved in congregational life for the good of the community and to what extent should they do so in order to find self fulfillment. Are these two goals necessarily the same? Can they be contradictory?
3. Do you agree with the statement "The individual always comes before the community? Why or why not?"

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra: A person must repair himself before he can repair the larger community as a whole. By saying "Re'eh," "Behold," addressed to the individual, first Moses suggests that we can not perfect the community until we have taken a good look at our own shortcomings. The Torah is each addressed to each individual first and only then "Lifneikhem," "to all of you," as a community second. (According to "Parperot LaTorah," by Rabbi Menachem Becker)

1. How can following the Torah help "repair" the individual? Why does Ibn Ezra suggest that we cannot improve the community before we first take a good look at our own shortcomings?
2. Do you believe that there are blessings and curses presented depending upon whether we live up to the challenges and laws of the Torah? In what sense? What do you think Moses means when he makes this statement?
3. What are the blessings that you get out of living as a member of the Jewish community and living by the traditions and practices of Judaism? How would your life be different without Judaism?

Glossary

Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra – 1089 – 1164, poet, grammarian, and Bible scholar during the Golden Age of Spain.

Vilna Gaon - 1720 – 1797, Elijah ben Solomon Zalman; a major Jewish intellectual leader of the eighteenth century and a staunch opponent of the Chasidic movement.

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

*"All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul."*