

D'Var Torah, ראה

Kabbalat Shabbat, August 11, 2023

This week's Torah portion is really a familiar one for us, even if we do not immediately recognize it by name. The Israelites are on the brink of entering the Promised Land. Moses, speaking to a people 40 years removed from slavery in Egypt, makes clear their covenant with God.

We read from Devarim (Deuteronomy), 11:26-16:17 (*Etz Hayim*, pp. 1061-1084). The parsha begins with *Re'eh*- ראה or "See." Moses is firm: "**See**, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the path that I enjoin you this day and follow other gods, whom you have not experienced." That is very clear, is it not?

The parsha details a series of laws in preparation for our ancestors' entrance into the Land of Israel. You will find these very familiar. The regulations include the obligation to destroy idolatry, laws of tithing and charity, the complex explication of dietary laws, holiday laws, and the prohibition of offering sacrifices outside of the place designated by God. It also discusses the festivals of Sukkot and Shavuot, the central sanctuary, and even sacred foods that may only be eaten in Jerusalem, but I will address these latter references a little bit later.

An Ethical Kashrut

Because much of this parsha, especially the passages detailing charity and Kashrut is so familiar to us, I have a challenge. What new insight could I possibly give you, based on my reading of the text? I know, for example, how varied the practice of kashrut is among members of the congregation. But is there a message that resonates with **all** of us, that makes sense for all of our lives? I would suggest that the often-excruciating detail of what is acceptable and what is forbidden, of how we properly slaughter animals and so much more—**these rules give us a blueprint for mindful, conscious eating**. That could be much more than just choosing the "right" food. Cantor Evan Kent suggests that if we are to honestly fulfill the commandment—"You shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the feelings of the stranger"—then when we eat our food perhaps we should consider things other than merely cloven hooves or scales and fins. How about the treatment of workers in the meat processing plant or fishery that provided our meal? Or perhaps the working conditions and wages of the on-line cooks and kitchen help in our favorite restaurant? If we aspire to an **ethical kashrut**, then I believe we will have embraced the moral implications of the many detailed prohibitions and permissions outlined in *Re'eh*. It will help us to be more aware of what we are eating, from whom we are buying, and how we are being served, and then to behave accordingly.

Simcha is Community

I would like to focus on one other aspect of *Re'eh* that may not be so familiar to us as the laws of kashrut or the laws of tithing and charity. If I asked you this evening to give me a single word that describes our ancestors trek into the Promised Land, what word would you give me? Would you say justice, compassion or holiness? Responsibility, perhaps? Would it surprise you to learn that there is another word--used only once in each of the other four books of the Torah, yet appearing 12 times in Devarim—that we read seven times in today's parsha? That word is *simcha*- שמחה, usually translated as joy.

There is a critical aspect of *simcha* that is central to our discussion. The word really doesn't translate well into English. Happiness, pleasure, contentment, glee, bliss, delight, and even ecstasy are emotions you can appreciate yourself. Not so with *simcha*. We have *simcha* as a **group** activity, we take joy **communally**. You cannot have a *simcha* by yourself.

I can't take credit for spotting all the uses of *simcha* in this parsha. Much of my observations on *simcha* are based on a beautiful drash by Rabbi Jonathan Saks, of blessed memory. He enumerates the seven times *simcha* is used in this parsha: ranging from rejoicing as we eat sacred food to being joyful at the feasts of Sukkot and Shavuot.

So why is Moses emphasizing *simcha*? Isn't it enough that our ancestors are finally on the verge of ending their 40-year trek and entering the Promised Land? Shouldn't Moses be focusing exclusively on ritual commandments, laws of governance and layers of authority or perhaps concentrating more on thanksgiving and praise to God-- for finally bringing his children to the Promised Land? No, because there is an even greater, more difficult task ahead: learning to share joy and love without the impetus of a crisis pulling everyone together. It is easy to serve God in fear; it is harder to serve God in joy. And it is sometimes a challenge to share a *simcha* with others if you are not consciously trying to do so.

Let's fast forward to the present, here and now for Kol HaNeshama. It was relatively easy to act and think and worry, and love, with one voice, when our focus was Rabbi Jennifer leaving and no one taking her place, and when we had no home after being forced to leave our temporary one. Now that we are back in South Gate, with our wonderful Rabbi Sigal, it is tempting to just say *Ma Tov*--How good it is that everything turned out all right. So nice that our crises are behind us. But that would do insult to our struggles. Now that we are here, we must build on our success, our own little "entry into the Promised Land." A greater task lies before us: to share the joy and mystery and love of each other as we build an even more splendid community. Make our visitors and our new members feel part of our family. With one *simcha* after another!

So, what have we learned this evening? Two things, I hope. Eat mindfully, rejoice communally.

Shabbat Shalom!