Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Re'eh
August 31, 2024 *** 27 Av, 5784

Re'eh in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2272/jewish/Reeh-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Re'eh," means "See," and it is found in Deuteronomy 11:26.
"See," says Moses to the people of Israel, "I place before you today a blessing and a curse"—the blessing that will come when they fulfill G-d's commandments, and the curse if they abandon them. These should be proclaimed on Mount Gerizim and Mount Ebal when the people cross over into the Holy Land.

A Temple should be established in "the place that G-d will choose to make dwell His name there," where the people should bring their sacrifices to Him; it is forbidden to make offerings to G-d in any other place. It is permitted to slaughter animals elsewhere, not as a sacrifice but to eat their meat; the blood (which in the Temple is poured upon the altar), however, may not be eaten.

A false prophet, or one who entices others to worship idols, should be put to death; an idolatrous city must be destroyed. The identifying signs for kosher animals and fish, and the list of non-kosher birds (first given in Leviticus 11), are repeated.

A tenth of all produce is to be eaten in Jerusalem, or else exchanged for money with which food is purchased and eaten there. In certain years this tithe is given to the poor instead. Firstborn cattle and sheep are to be offered in the Temple, and their meat eaten by the kohanim (priests).

The mitzvah of charity obligates a Jew to aid a needy fellow with a gift or loan. On the Sabbatical year (occurring every seventh year), all loans are to be forgiven. All indentured servants are to be set free after six years of service.

Our Parshah concludes with the laws of the three pilgrimage festivals—Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot—when all should go to "see and be seen" before G-d in the Holy Temple.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 54:11-55:5
https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/544558/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah is the third of a series of seven "haftarot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.

G-d addresses the "afflicted and storm-tossed" Jerusalem "who has not been comforted," assuring her that she, and her people, will be restored to full glory. The foundation, walls and ground of Jerusalem will be laid with precious stones. Her children will be "disciples of the L-rd," and will enjoy abundant peace. Any weapon engineered against her will fail.

The prophet then invites the thirsty to acquire "water," namely those who are thirsty for spirituality should study the quenching words of Torah. He promises the nation an everlasting covenant similar to that made with King David. This is also an allusion to the Messiah, David's descendant, who will be revered by all of the nations of the world.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Making Poverty History by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l 5771
https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/reeh/making-poverty-history/

Listen to these stories. Behind them lies an extraordinary insight into the nature of Jewish ethics:

Story 1. Rabbi Abba used to bind money in his scarf, sling it on his back, and place it at the disposal of the poor. (Ketubot 67b)

Story 2. Mar Ukba had a poor man in his neighbourhood into whose door socket he used to throw four coins every day. Once the poor man thought, "I will go and see who does me this kindness." That day Mar Ukba stayed late at the house of study, and his wife was coming home with him. As soon as the poor man saw them moving the door [to leave the coins] he ran out after them, but they fled from him and hid. Why did they do this? Because it was taught: One should throw himself into a fiery furnace rather than publicly put his neighbour to shame. (Ketubot 67b)

Story 3. When Rabbi Jonah saw a member of a good family who had lost his money and was ashamed to accept charity, he would go and say to him, "I have heard that an inheritance has come your way in a city across the sea. So here is an article of some value. Sell it and use the proceeds. When you are more affluent, you will repay me." As soon as the man took it, Rabbi Jonah would say, "It's yours to keep as a gift." (Vayikra Rabbah 34:1)

These stories are all deeply connected to the mitzvah of *tzedakah,* whose source is in this week's *parsha*:

If anyone is poor among your fellow Israelites in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted toward them. Rather, be openhanded and freely lend them whatever they need. Deut. 15:7-8

Give generously to them and do so without a grudging heart; then because of this the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in everything you put your hand to. There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore, I command you to be openhanded toward your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land. Deut. 15:10-11

What we have here is a unique and still remarkable programme for the elimination of poverty.

The first extraordinary fact about the laws of *tzedakah* as articulated in the Oral Tradition is the concept itself. *Tzedakah* does not mean "charity". We see this immediately in the form of a law inconceivable in any other moral system:

Someone who does not wish to give *tzedakah* or to give less than is appropriate may be compelled to do so by a Jewish court of law.

Maimonides, Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:10

Charity is always voluntary. *Tzedakah* is compulsory.
Therefore, *tzedakah* does not mean charity. The nearest English equivalent is social justice.

The second is the principle evident in the three stories above. Poverty in Judaism is conceived not merely in material terms: the poor lack the means of sustenance. It is also conceived in psychological terms. Poverty humiliates. It robs people of dignity. It makes them dependent on others – thus depriving them of independence which the Torah sees as essential to self-respect.

This deep psychological insight is eloquently expressed in the third paragraph of the *Grace after Meals*:

Please, O Lord our God, do not make us dependent on the gifts or loans of other people, but only on Your full, open, holy, and generous hand so that we may suffer neither shame nor humiliation forever and all time.

As a result, Jewish law focuses not only on how much we must give but also on the manner in which we do so. Ideally the donor should not know to whom he or she is giving (story 1), nor the recipient know from whom he or she is receiving (story 2). The third story exemplifies another principle:

If a poor person does not want to accept *tzedakah*, we should practise a form of [benign] deception and give it to him under the guise of a loan.

Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:9

Maimonides sums up the general principle thus:

Whoever gives charity to the poor with bad grace and averted eyes has lost all the merit of his action even though he gives him a thousand gold pieces. He should give with good grace and with joy and should sympathise with them, him in his plight, as it is said, 'Have I not wept for those in trouble? Has not my soul grieved for the poor?' (Job 30:25)

Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:4

This is the logic behind two laws that are otherwise inexplicable. The first is:

Even a poor person who is dependent on *tzedakah* is obliged to give *tzedakah.* Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 7:5

The law seems absurd. Why should we give money to the poor so that they may give to the poor? It makes sense only on this assumption, that giving is essential to human dignity and *tzedakah* is the obligation to ensure that everyone has that dignity.

The second is this famous ruling of Maimonides:

The highest degree of charity, exceeded by none, is when a person assists a poor Jew by providing him with a gift or a loan or by accepting him into a business partnership or by helping him find employment – in a word by putting him in a situation where he can dispense with other people's aid.

Laws of Gifts to the Poor, 10:7

Giving someone a job or making him your partner would not normally be considered charity at all. It costs you nothing. But this further serves to show that *tzedakah* does not mean charity. It means giving people the means to live a dignified life, and within the Jewish value system any form of employment is more dignified than dependence.

We have in this ruling of Maimonides in the 12th century the principle that Muhammad Yunus rediscovered in our time, and for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize: the idea of micro-loans enabling poor people to start small businesses. It is a very powerful idea.

In contradistinction to many other religious systems, Judaism refused to romanticise poverty or anaesthetise its pain. Faith is not what Karl Marx

called “the opium of the people.” The rabbis refused to see poverty as a blessed state, an affliction to be born with acceptance and grace. Instead, the rabbis called it “a kind of death” and “worse than fifty plagues”. They said, “Nothing is harder to bear than poverty, because he who is crushed by poverty is like one to whom all the troubles of the world cling and upon whom all the curses of Deuteronomy have descended. If all other troubles were placed one side and poverty on the other, poverty would outweigh them all.”

Maimonides went to the heart of the matter when he said:

The well-being of the soul can only be obtained after that of the body has been secured. The Guide for the Perplexed, 3:27

Poverty is not a noble state. You cannot reach spiritual heights if you have no food to eat, no roof over your head, if you lack access to medical attention, or if you are beset by financial worries. I know of no saner approach to poverty, welfare, and social justice than that of Judaism. Unsurpassed in its time, it remains the benchmark of a decent society to this day.

Petition or Protest: Re’eh/ Rosh Hashanah/ Yom Kippur

by Adam Zagoria -Muffet

https://www.jtsa.edu/torah/petition-or-protest-3/

One month from now, we turn to renew the Hebrew calendar, and our spiritual lives with it. On that day, “the day the world is born,” we read the story of Hannah (1 Sam 1:1–2:10). After struggling for years to conceive, Hannah finally gives birth to a son, Shemuel, for whom she had prayed at the temple in Shiloh.

Yet our Sages add another dimension to the story. In the Gemara (BT Berakhot 31a), we hear that Hannah actually threatened to undergo the *sotah* ritual, a humiliating and traumatizing ordeal meant for spouses suspected of adultery, in the hope that its promise of fertility for the fortunate few who passed would open her womb. Hannah sought, from this point of view, to stimulate the divine system from below—to engineer

cosmic blessing through threats, coercion, and the intimidating effect of recklessness.

Turns out, this is an established approach to the Divine in our faith, and one that is well-suited to our current calendrical moment.

Our Sages saw Hannah as trying to trap God into offering blessing, and they interpreted the same from another unlikely context, one that also occurs during this month's Torah readings. We read about the apparently bizarre mitzvah of *shilu'ah haken*, the sending away of the mother bird. Deut. 22:6–7 is the sole description of this shockingly precise mitzvah: "If you happen upon a bird's nest while on the road, whether in a tree or on the ground, whether with chicks in it or still-unhatched eggs, and the mother bird is sitting on the eggs or chicks, you shall not take the mother with the young. Instead, chase away the mother bird and take the young—*in order that you be well and your days long*."

What's the purpose of this mysterious mitzvah? Despite its often being cited as the case par excellence of a *hok*, or irrational commandment, many explanations have been offered. In some sense, the explanation is right in front of us: that we should be well and live long. Yet the standard reasoning, drawing on the Midrash, is that performing the mitzvah reminds us that God's compassion is upon all creatures, and that performing the mitzvah cultivates the same compassion within ourselves (Devarim Rabbah,Ki Tetzei 6:1; Vayikra Rabbah 27:11). The exact nature of this compassion is not clear, however. Are we exercising compassion for the mother, in preventing her from watching us take her babies? Are we exercising compassion for the species, in not eliminating the possibility of procreation?

Standing at the threshold of the month of Elul, in which we pray for compassion for ourselves, we owe it to ourselves to dig a bit deeper into this mitzvah's meaning. We'll find that learning to exercise compassion is not a complete explanation for it.

The deeper level is the one that Hannah acted out in the rabbinic imagination. She didn't only plead for divine compassion, she took action—manipulating the spiritual system to *ensure* compassion.

Similarly, for the significance of shilu'ah haken, the Zohar offers a deeper

take. The Zohar tells us there is an angel appointed over the birds, and when we perform the mitzvah and chase away the mother, that angel appears before God angrily, asking, "God, how could it be a commandment to show such cruelty to birds?" Immediately, the Zohar tells us, God turns to the other angels and says, "Look, this one is concerned about his birds—but not a single one of you could plead on behalf of the Shekhinah and her children exiled on Earth?!" Eventually, out of frustration, God states, "Then I will act for my own sake," arousing compassion for the Shekhinah and Israel here on Earth (Tikkunei Hazohar 23a).

Thus, our performance of the mitzvah does eventually stimulate divine compassion—but only through our exercise of cruelty. *Shilu'ah haken*, for the Zohar, operates the same way the Sages saw Hannah maneuver in her moment of desperation—a way to engineer the cosmos through our own action, a way to "work the system" and manipulate God into acting for our sake and for the sake of compassion. In this view, we don't simply plead for compassion; instead, we blackmail, threaten, and coerce compassion from God.

As we stand at the beginning of the journey toward Rosh Hashanah and enter the period when *selihot* (penitential prayers) are recited in the weekday liturgy, it is worth considering what exactly we are doing with our spiritual efforts. Are we, like the midrash about *shilu'ah haken* says, exercising compassion upon ourselves and pleading that God grant it to us? Or are we, like Hannah and the Zohar, using what resources we have to *make* God be compassionate upon us? Does this mean that we should do teshuvah differently? Maybe not; maybe all that is required is to *see* teshuvah differently. Perhaps we should embrace Hannah's method and find a way to make God see us. Perhaps we should understand the practices of these *Yamim Nora'im*, these Days of Awe, not as petition, but as protest.

What if the fast of Yom Kippur was not about depriving ourselves, but instead was about getting God's attention? What if the hunger we experience is not that of an ascetic practice, but that of a hunger strike? What we do, when we recite *selihot* every morning, when we rise early to

plead before God, when we starve our bodies to feed our souls, is protest. Not petition, but protest. We don't do *shilu'ah haken* in order to *be* compassionate; we act cruelly in order to *get* compassion. Similarly, we should not spend the next 40 days asking for forgiveness, we should ensure it. We should act in a way that requires God to forgive us. We should work the system, and appeal to God's sense of justice as much as God's sense of love. The mitzvot purify us, but they also can be our form of protest. Our earnest engagement with repentance can be a way of saying, perhaps above all else, "Look at what a mess it is down here! I'm going to rub it in your face until you do something about it." Perhaps if we embrace the practice of protest, we'll find our petitions better received and our souls more ready to begin another year in a renewed world.
This commentary was originally published in 2017. *(Adam Zagoria – Moffet is the Rabbi, ST. Albans Masorti Synagogue and an Alum of the JTS Rabbinical School)*

Re'eh: Are We a People Chosen by God? By Rabbi Robert Tabak
https://truah.org/resources/robert-tabak-reeh-moraltorah_2024_/

The Torah portion Re'eh includes a famous and troubling line: "For you are a people consecrated to the Eternal your God; the Eternal your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be a treasured people." (Deuteronomy 14:2)

What does it mean to be chosen and treasured by God? Is this poetic image, reinforced at so many places in the Torah and the traditional prayer book, meaningful or harmful? Are Jews "better" than other people? How do we reconcile this special relationship — woven deeply into Jewish texts — with other texts, especially the creation story in Genesis where all humanity is created in the image of God, long before there are different peoples and certainly no Israelites?

Mordecai Kaplan, founder of Reconstructionist Judaism, delivered forceful critiques of chosenness in the mid-twentieth century. He saw this idea as a historical development, but no longer one that was harmless or served to sustain an oppressed minority. Kaplan stated that belief in being "chosen" leads to claims of Jewish superiority — something untrue and

incompatible with a democratic society. He rejected the idea that this concept was necessary for Jewish survival today. "*By no kind of dialectics is it possible to remove the odium of comparison from any reinterpretation of an idea which makes invidious distinctions between one people and another*." ("The Future of the American Jew," emphasis in original.)

In the Reconstructionist siddur, prayers such as the Friday night kiddush, the blessing before reading the Torah, and the *Aleinu* prayer are re-worded to drop chosenness. Other prayer books have also made some moves in this direction. The Reform Movement in the U.S. created a prayer book that includes several alternative readings for *Aleinu*, as does the Israeli *Masorti* [Conservative] siddur. The newest Israeli Reform siddur (finished in 2021) does not drop the idea of chosenness, but in several places — including the Torah blessings — offers a radical re-working as an alternative: A few letters change to convert the traditional "who has chosen us *from* all peoples" to "who has chosen us *with* all peoples."

This discussion is not only about synagogue texts and prayers. Today, especially in Israel, there are much more frequent assertions of "Jewish superiority." Professor Menachem Klein says, "...The new Judaism — Israeli Judaism it should be said — identifies sovereignty and the rule wielded in its name, with Jewish supremacy and oppression." ("Israel's Rule Over the Palestinians Has Created a New Judaism") Rabbi Sharon Brous says, "As painful as it is, we must affirm that Jewish supremacy poses a real and present danger to the Jewish State and to the Jewish people." ("Tears of Zion") Events since October 7, 2023, have magnified these tendencies.

Yet other texts provide a different framework. Leviticus 19:2 says "You shall be holy..." not "you are already holy. " Orthodox iconoclast Yeshayahu Leibowitz wrote, "The uniqueness of the People Israel is not a fact; it is a task. The holiness of Israel is not a reality but a role." ("The Uniqueness of the People Israel") Like challenges to patriarchy in Judaism, contemporary

Jews need to continue to confront the problematic texts in the centuries of biblical, rabbinic, and later works.

The continuing war, violence against Palestinians by West Bank "religious" Jews, and crises in Israel have accelerated the need for an active role from American Jews who support different views of Judaism. Writing before the current war, Rabbi Amy Klein — who lives in the Upper Galilee in Israel and is a leader in protests against policies of the current Israeli government — wrote about the aftermath of a pogrom by Jewish settlers against the West Bank Palestinian city of Huwara. "Huwara has legitimized speaking out against racism at demonstrations to save Israel's democracy," (RRA Connection, Early Spring, 2023).

Menachem Klein wrote, "Another possibility, which hasn't yet been tried, is to find a Jewish theological and historic basis for sharing sovereignty with non-Jews." We need to learn from and add our North American Jewish voices and insights, liberal and traditional, to those Israelis — including those in groups such as Rabbis for Human Rights and the *Ha-smol ha-emuni* [Faithful Left] — working to strengthen varieties of Judaism based on *tzedek* (justice) and shalom (peace). If Jews are to express some sense of being "treasured," we need new religious perspectives recognizing everyone as created in God's image. *(Rabbi Robert Tabak is a retired hospital chaplain and editor of the Reconstructionist Rabbinical Association's RRA Connection. He lives in the Philadelphia area and is an active member of Minyan Dorshei Derekh.)*

Yahrtzeits

Edna Axelrod remembers her father John Ball on Sat. Aug. 31
Debra Grossman remembers her father Jordan Brown on Sat. Aug. 31
Merna Most remembers her sister-in-law Florence Most on Wed.Sept. 4