

## Torah Thoughts - Parshat Re'eh

5777:

Being part of a people, a community, means taking on the behaviors of those around us. We learn as children that in the middle of a baseball game's seventh inning we sing 'Take Me Out to the Ballgame.' It is commonly accepted that we say things like 'Please' and 'Thank you' when interacting with others. And everyone knows that if Shabbat services begin at 9:30 that one can wander in at 10, 10:30 or even 11 a.m. (just kidding; some customs are not entirely positive.) But how do we know those things? Who began those practices, or how did they evolve? How do we know what we know?

One of the things that binds Jews together as a community across time and space is a set of common understandings about how to believe or behave. For example, in parshat Re'eh this week the Torah provides us with the definitions and principles that shape a distinctively Jewish approach to eating. Given how complex Jewish tradition is in the realm of food, it can come as a shock to see just how little information the Torah provides about kashrut (the dietary laws). In short, only those land animals with split hooves and which chew their cud, only those sea animals that have both fins and scales, and a specific list of animals of the air are permitted as food. The Torah also forbids consuming animals that have died naturally, i.e. road kill, even among those permitted animals. It concludes this section by demanding, famously, "You shall not boil a kid (a young goat or sheep) in its mother's milk." Elsewhere the Torah adds other details, such as the prohibition against consuming blood, but the single paragraph in the parshah covers most of what the text has to teach us about distinctively Jewish eating.

So much is left unsaid that it was left to the sages to explain just how to implement this system on a daily basis. The majority of the laws of kashrut derive not from the written law but from oral tradition. The early rabbis used a complex system of textual analysis to derive those rulings, based on the assumption of the divine origins of the Torah. For example, since the phrase "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk" appears two other times, using the exact same language, they understood that the Torah actually teaches us three distinct aspects of the laws of separating milk and meat: that we should not cook meat and milk together, that we should not eat milk and meat together, and that we should not derive profit from the cooking of milk and meat together.

It is not unreasonable to question the sages' methodology. How do we know that this threefold repetition means three different things, or these particular three things? Is that idea self-evident, or is it rather an oral tradition passed down from the time of Moses, or instead a product of interpretation on the part of the rabbis? How do we know, as Jews, what we know?

There are multiple, mutually reinforcing ways to know what it means to be part of the Jewish people: The Torah might seem like a good place to start, but in reality it is usually the last source we consider. Usually the words of the most recent sages, and the accepted practice of the community, is our first source. Then, we go backwards through the early modern period, the medieval period and into the Talmud. Finally, if we seek additional understanding, we consider the words of the Torah. As Jews, we know what we know not only from the Tanakh (the Hebrew Bible), but through a long textual tradition and through accepted practice. We know what we know because we expend a great deal of mental energy studying and analyzing all of these sources, to understand how we became who we are and to have a sense of who we may yet be. It is never enough to simply accept and repeat the customs we have inherited. Our job as Jews is to

constantly re-engage with tradition, in order to learn the will of the living God in our own time, in order to know what we should know.

Shabbat shalom

5778:

Citizenship is membership in a society that affords certain rights and demands certain behaviors. Being a citizen means that each of us enjoys the protection of law under the Constitution, and that each has a personal investment in the society as a whole. Part of being a good citizen is knowing what our rights and responsibilities are. Knowing what is permitted and what is not in American law guides us to a life of good citizenship.

Similarly, as Jews, we are also part of a religious and ethnic group that has its own Constitution, the Torah, and which also provides us with rules to live by and a feeling of belonging to Jewish society. Like our identities as Americans, we cannot hope to understand our rights and responsibilities as Jews unless we know our “Constitution” very well indeed.

Parshat R’eih begins with a simple choice: Blessing or curse? Following God’s mitzvot leads to blessing; disregarding them leads to curse. But the most basic curse that a Jew can suffer is ignorance of Torah itself. Without knowing our responsibilities, we are not only unable to make good choices; we can’t make choices at all! During the upcoming year, I am challenging our members to exert themselves in the study of Torah. By learning a few words of Torah each day or each week, we learn who we are and what the stakes are in deciding whether to heed God’s words. Desisting from study curses us to be strangers to God, our tradition, and ourselves, while frequent study blesses us intellectually, spiritually and morally. Deep familiarity with the Jewish Constitution lays out the choices of what it means to live a righteous life. Let us choose wisely this year, so that the words of Torah become an integral part of our lives and a guide for a year of blessing.

Shabbat shalom.