

TORAH
OF
Reconciliation

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RE'EH ראה

(Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17)

An Individual Can Impact the World

See, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse. (Deuteronomy 11:26)

“See” is as though [Moses] addresses the individual. “Before you” is as though he addresses the multitudes. [This is] in accordance with what the sages said: “Always a person should imagine that the entire world [is balanced] between merits and sins. If one performs one *mitzva*, one inclines [the balance] for oneself and for the entire world to the side of merit.” Therefore [Moses] said to every individual, “see,” so that everyone should see with the eye of one’s intellect that all of one’s deeds redound [to the merit] “before you,” for all of you [in the plural]. (Kli Yakar, Deuteronomy 11:26)

Within four words of the opening sentence of this Torah portion, the reader is surprised to find that the grammar is inconsistent. First Moses speaks to the individual (“See”), but then he turns immediately to the entire people (“before you”). The grammatical forms mysteriously change from singular to plural. Commentators assume the change is intentional, with a special lesson to be learned. The Kli Yakar suggests that the power of the deed of each individual connects to the fate of the entire world! The responsibility of the individual has a very wide reach, rippling out to affect a much wider sphere. This ancient rabbinic teaching underscores their faith in the power of each individual to make a difference. It is impossible to calculate the potential impact of any deed.

How Should One Live with Those of Another Faith?

These are the statutes and the ordinances, which you shall observe to do in the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, has given you to possess it, all the days that you live upon the earth. You shall surely destroy all the places, wherein the nations that you are to dispossess served their gods, upon the high mountains, and upon the hills, and under every leafy tree. And you shall break down their altars, and dash in pieces their pillars, and burn their Asherim with fire; and you shall hew down the graven images of their gods; and you shall destroy their name out of that place. (Deuteronomy 12:1-3)

The sages taught: In a city where non-Jews and Jews live, appoint tax collectors from among the non-Jews and from the Jews, collect from the non-Jews and from the Jews, sustain the non-Jewish poor and the Jewish poor, visit the sick among the non-Jews and among the Jews, bury the dead of the non-Jews and the Jewish dead, comfort the non-Jewish mourners and the Jewish mourners, and wash the garments of the non-Jews and the garments of the Jews in order [to promote] the ways of peace. (Jerusalem Talmud, *Gittin* 5:47:3)

Rabbi Eleazar Hakapar the son of Rebbi said: Great is the power of peace for when Israel [the Jewish people] form one union, even if there is worship of idolatry among them, the quality of judgment does not strike them, as it is said: "When Ephraim is a union of idolaters, let them be" (Hosea 4:17). But when they are divided one from the other, the quality of judgment falls on them, as it is said: "When their hearts are divided, then they are guilty" (Hosea 10:2). (*Midrash Tanchuma*, Shoftim 18)

The Deuteronomic code is ruthless when speaking of idolatry or those who practice idolatry among Jew and non-Jew alike. The rabbis, however, modify the Torah's posture greatly in considering a world where Jews and non-Jews must find ways to live together in peace. They teach that neighborliness must supersede any conflict in theology. Kindness must be practiced equally toward all. All of the commandments governing bestowal

of kindnesses on a fellow Jew are now extended to include every other, due to "the ways of peace." In a conflict of values when peace would be in tension with even fundamental Jewish beliefs, peace takes precedence.

One might sense that such teachings are more pragmatic than ideological. When living as a minority in a culture that has over time marginalized or oppressed Jews, it is the better part of wisdom to reach to cultivate positive relationships. Yet, beyond the vagaries of history, there is a belief and a hope that the sacred image within every human being might be summoned to build a more secure home for all.

Even within the Jewish community itself, unity was valued over correctness in belief, ritual, and worship. Thus even if wayward Jews worshipped idols but were united, they would be protected from harm. The demand for purity of belief is softened when people live together peaceably.

How Can One Follow and Cleave to God?

After the Lord your God shall you walk, and Him shall you fear, and His commandments shall you keep, and unto His voice shall you hearken, and Him shall you serve, and to Him shall you cleave. (Deuteronomy 13:5)

Rabbi Chama son of Rabbi Chanina further said: What is the meaning of the text "Follow none but the Lord your God"? Is it then possible for a human being to walk after the Shechina? For has it not been said, "For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire" (Deuteronomy 4:24)? But [the meaning is] to walk after the attributes of the Holy One, blessed be He. As He clothes the naked, for it is written, "And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife coats of skin, and clothed them" (Genesis 3:21), so do you also clothe the naked. The Holy One, blessed be He, visited the sick, for it is written, "And the Lord appeared to him [Abraham] by the oaks of Mamre" (Genesis 18:1), so you should also visit the sick. The Holy One, blessed be He, comforted mourners, for it is written, "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham, that God blessed Isaac his son" (Genesis 25:11), so you should also comfort

mourners. The Holy One, blessed be He, buried the dead, for it is written, "And He buried him [Moses] in the valley" (Deuteronomy 36:6), so you should also bury the dead. (Talmud, *Sota* 14a)

"To follow in all His ways" (Deuteronomy 10:12): These are the ways of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it is said: "The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious, long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy to the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin; and cleanses" (Exodus 34:6-7). And He says: "Everyone who is called by the Name of God will escape" (Joel 3:5). But how is it possible for a person to be called by the Name of the Holy One, blessed be He? But just as God is called compassionate and gracious, you should also be compassionate and gracious and give gifts freely to all. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, is called righteous, as it is said: "God is righteous in all His ways and pious in all His deeds" (Psalms 145:17), you should also be righteous. Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, is called pious, as it is said, "and pious in all His deeds" (*ibid.*), you should also be pious. (*Sifre*, Deuteronomy 49)

God has many faces in Torah. God is gracious and merciful. God is angry and unforgiving. God is caring. God is cruel. God is a peacemaker. God is a "man of war." God is tender. God is violent. Virtually every nuance of emotion and behavior known to human beings is also ascribed to God. And each emotion and quality is accentuated due to divine power.

When, however, the rabbis seek guidance for human behavior from the manifestations of God, invariably they choose the kind, soft faces to be emulated. In many sources, there are variations on the teaching that since we know that God is merciful and gracious, so also we should pursue the same qualities and be merciful and gracious. Never are the angry and violent attributes raised up for emulation. One could make the case that just as God becomes angry and violent in the face of serious human shortcomings, so should a person behave when confronting sin. The sages never follow that road.

Why are the rabbis so selective? As Jewish tradition evolved and their understanding of the Divine unfolded, sages concluded that the

compassionate qualities of God were of God's essence. They read and knew of God as being very angry at times and going to war with an awesome display of violence, but they became convinced that these aspects were not truly expressive of God's deepest Self. And when they chose a path for educating themselves and their young, they selected what they considered to be God's essence as the most worthy model. Anger and violence were regrettable dimensions of living in this world, and they would even have their time and place. Yet the ideal would be to distance oneself from those dangerous qualities and to strive for compassion and reconciliation.

Redistribution of Blessings Is a Key Commandment

At the end of every seven years you shall make a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release that which he had lent his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother; because the Lord's release has been proclaimed.

If there be among you a needy man, one of your brethren, within any of your gates, in your land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your needy brother; but you shall surely open your hand to him, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need in that which he wants.

If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, be sold to you, he shall serve you six years; and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty; you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, and out of your threshing-floor, and out of your winepress; of that which the Lord your God had blessed you, you shall give to him. (Deuteronomy 15:1-2, 7-8, 12-14)

The shared theme of these commandments is bridging the gaps between haves and have-nots. The Torah seems unwilling to acquiesce to a permanent inequity in the distribution of blessings. Thus redistribution of wealth and raising the status of the downtrodden was written into predictable cycles of life in community. Cancellation of debts came every seven years. Land that had been purchased was returned to its original owners every

fifty years in the land of Israel. (See Leviticus, chapter 25.) Enslavement of Hebrews, usually brought on by indebtedness, had a normal limit of six years. Giving generously to the poor was mandated continuously with the utopian goal of doing away with poverty.

The underlying theme seems to be that endemic gaps between the wealthy and the poor are unsustainable in a peaceful and stable society. A culture can be shaped to attempt to diminish gaps between citizens. Economic justice – including periodic adjustments, new beginnings, and redistribution – helps nurture a social fabric that can endure.

Establish the Ways of Peace

If there be among you a needy person, one of your brethren, within any of your gates, in your land which the Lord your God gives you, you shall not harden your heart, nor shut your hand from your needy brother. (Deuteronomy 15:7)

In a city which has Israelites and idol worshippers, the leaders collect from the Israelites and from the idol worshippers due to the “ways of peace.” And they support the poor of idol worshippers and the poor of Israel due to the “ways of peace.” They eulogize and bury the deceased of idol worshippers due to the “ways of peace.” They comfort the mourners among idol worshippers due to the “ways of peace.” (Tosefta, *Gittin* 3, *halacha* 13, 14)

They do not try to prevent the poor among the gentiles from gathering gleanings, the forgotten sheaf, and *peab* [the corner of the field left unharvested], due to the “ways of peace.” (Mishna, *Gittin* 5:8)

The obligation to care for one's own family and members of one's own faith tradition and ethnic group are spelled out in detail in passages of Torah. The inclination to reach out in times of need to those close is natural and commendable.

The rabbis in the postbiblical era extended that obligation to be more inclusive. In fact, they went far beyond the obligations recorded in Torah in extending responsibility to every human being in need. The concept *mipene*

darche shalom, “due to the ways of peace,” was elaborated in great detail and applied to virtually every critical area of human need. When it came to another in distress, one’s responsibility ignored boundaries of faith, tribe, or nationality. Urgent needs of those close might take precedence especially when resources were scarce, but there was an unequivocal requirement not to stand by and become a spectator to the sufferings of any others.

Complete Joy Is Inclusive

Seven weeks you shall count; from the time the sickle is first put to the standing corn you shall begin to number seven weeks. And you shall keep the feast of weeks for the Lord your God after the measure of the freewill-offering of your hand, which you shall give, according as the Lord your God blesses you. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and the Levite that is within your gates, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are in your midst, in the place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause His name to dwell there. And you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall observe and do these statutes. (Deuteronomy 16:9–12)

You shall keep the feast of tabernacles seven days, after you have gathered in from your threshing-floor and your winepress. And you shall rejoice in your feast, you, and your son, and your daughter, and your man-servant, and your maid-servant, and the Levite, and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, that are within your gates. Seven days you shall keep a feast for the Lord your God in the place which the Lord shall choose; because the Lord your God shall bless you in all your increase, and in all the work of your hands, and you shall be altogether joyful. (Deuteronomy 16:13–15)

“And you shall remember that you were a slave”: For this very reason I redeemed you that you observe and do all of these precepts. (Rashi, Deuteronomy 16:12)

In these verses, the commandment to rejoice is joined with a careful enumeration of all those who should share in the rest and the joy of major holidays. Essentially everyone who shares in one's society is counted. The inclusiveness of the *mitzva* to rejoice is mentioned twice within this short passage for the Feast of Weeks and for the holiday of Sukkot. The implication seems to be that complete joy is only possible when it is fully shared, when no one, rich or poor, slave or free person, Jew or non-Jew, is excluded. The theme of much of the legislation at the conclusion of this Torah reading is the need to equitably distribute the blessings of life, material blessings as well as time to rest and rejoice.

Passover is treated differently here from the other major festivals. There is notably no commandment to rejoice nor is there this inclusive list of participants. In practice, the directive to rest was understood to include everyone. From one holiday one would learn to practice similarly for them all. However the absence of a *mitzva* to be joyful is most glaring. Since Passover was the one major festival that involved lethal conflict and a great toll taken on the Egyptians, it is possible that neither the Torah text itself nor the rabbinic commentaries felt that heartfelt joy would be possible.

The sages do apply lessons from Passover in other ways to the other festivals, however. Rashi adds that including everyone should be a natural consequence of Jewish historical memory, namely of having once been enslaved as a people in Egypt. After such a trauma, the Jewish people must choose a path that leaves no one outside.