Simchat Torah Challenge

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Re'eh

You Can't Always Get What You Want…

In this week's portion, Parshat Re'eh, Moses communicates to the Israelites a series of laws about sacrifices, tithes, and keeping kosher. In one verse near the beginning of the parsha, Moses critiques the rebellious conduct of the Jews in the desert:

דברים יב:ח לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אֲנַחְנוּ עֹשִׂים פֹּה הַיּוֹם אִישׁ כָּל־הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו:	**Deuteronomy 12:8** You shall not act at all as we now act here, everyone as they please,

- **Why do you think Moses describes the people as being able to do whatever they wanted in the desert?**
- **Have you ever been part of a group with no real structure or shared rules? If so, what happened?**

A very similar sentiment appears in the book of Judges, which appears in the section of the Bible called Prophets. Judges describes a period in the land of Israel before the advent of monarchy, when Israel lacked long-term centralized leadership. The final verse in the book sums up that entire period:

שופטים כא:כה בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה:	**Judges 21:25** In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as they pleased.

- **Based on this verse, how might having a king affect the people's behavior?**
- **Have you ever seen a leader—or the lack of one—transform a community you were part of?**

This "free-for-all" sentiment—and the problems it leads to—are closely associated with the writing of the British political theorist Thomas Hobbes. Here, Hobbes describes the danger of man in his natural state:

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 14 For as long as every man holdeth this Right, of doing any thing he liketh; so long are all men in the condition of Warre.

- **Hobbes argues that a society where everyone does as they please inevitably leads to war. Do you agree? Why or why not?**

TIn his philosophical treatise *The Guide for the Perplexed*, the towering medieval scholar Maimonides also writes on the dangers of man's unregulated desires. In regard to the purpose of the Torah and its commandments, Maimonides explains:

מורה נבוכים, חלק ג כז שתי מטרות לתורה: תיקון הנפש ותיקון הגוף... ואילו תיקון הגוף מתקיים בתיקון מצבי מחייתם אלה עם אלה. עניין זה מושג על ידי שני דברים: האחד, סילוק העושק מביניהם, כלומר שלא יהיה כל אחד מבני האדם רשאי לעשות כרצונו וכיכולתו, אלא ייכפה למה שמועיל לכלל.	***Guide for the Perplexed*, 3:27** The general object of the Law is twofold: the well-being of the soul, and the well-being of the body.... The well-being of the body is established by a proper management of the relations in which we live one to another. This we can attain in two ways: first by removing all violence from our midst: that is to say, that we do not do every one as he pleases, desires, and is able to do; but every one of us does that which contributes towards the common welfare. Secondly, by teaching every one of us such good morals as must produce a good social state.

- **Maimonides argues that preventing people from doing whatever they want helps remove violence from society. What does this suggest about his view of human nature, Do you agree?**
- **Maimonides implicitly argues that physical and social wellbeing are interconnected. Do you think that's true? Can you think of a time when the health of your community affected your own well-being?**

Up until now, the sources we have seen warn against the danger of everyone doing what they think is right. However, a slightly different approach is suggested by the writings of the Netziv. The Netziv, or Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehudah Berlin, was a 19th century Lithuanian rabbi and one of the greatest scholars of his time. The Netziv wrote a commentary on the Torah, and in his introduction to Genesis he praised the forefathers for being "*yashar*," upright:

העמק דבר, פתיחה לספר בראשית שהקב"ה... אינו סובל צדיקים כאלו אלא באופן שהולכים בדרך הישר גם בהליכות עולם ולא בעקמימות אע"ג שהוא לש"ש דזה גורם חרבן הבריאה והריסות ישוב הארץ. וזה היה שבח האבות שמלבד שהיו צדיקים וחסידים ואוהבי ה' באופן	***Haamek Davar*, Introduction to Genesis** [God is only accepting] of those who act in a way that is socially *yashar* [upright]—unlike those who act in a perverse manner, even when their actions are performed for the sake of Heaven. As such

היותר אפשר. עוד היו ישרים. היינו שהתנהגו עם אוה"ע אפי' עובדי אלילים מכוערים. מ"מ היו עמם באהבה וחשו לטובתם באשר היא קיום הבריאה. כמו שאנו רואים כמה השתטח א"א להתפלל על סדום. אע"ג שהיה שנא אותם ואת מלכם תכלית שנאה עבור רשעתם כמבואר במאמרו למלך סדום. מ"מ חפץ בקיומם. וברבה פ' וירא (פמ"ט) איתא ע"ז שאמר הקב"ה לא"א אהבת צדק ותשנא רשע. אהבת להצדיק את בריותי ותשנא להרשיען ע"כ וכו'.	[a deficiency] can lead to the destruction of [God's] creation and the ruin of civilization. This was the greatness of our forefathers. In addition to being righteous, pious, and lovers of God to the utmost degree, they were also upright. That means they were civil with the [other] nations of the world, despite [the latter] being detestable idol worshipers. Our forefathers nevertheless extended them love and concern for their welfare, as this fortifies [God's] creation.

- **According to the Netziv, what does it mean to be *yashar*?**
- **Who in your life exemplifies the Netziv's idea of being *yashar*? How?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. How does the Netziv deepen your understanding of the verse from Re'eh?
2. Moses explicitly tied this instruction to the Jewish people entering the Land of Israel. Why do you think that moment in particular prompted this command?
3. Is Moses condemning the Israelites' behavior in the desert, or explaining that life in the Land will require a different kind of society? What supports your reading?
4. After learning these sources, what is one idea that will stick with you?

Suggestions for Further Study
For a roundup of interesting ideas about Parshat Re'eh, you can see the Simchat Torah Challenge's materials here.

If you are interested in seeing further sources on Re'eh, you can find them on Sefaria's Re'eh topic page, which houses a wide variety of texts. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria's topic pages on Governments, Righteous, and Free Will.

Maimonides' "Guide for the Perplexed" is a foundational work of Jewish philosophy, and touches on a wide range of subjects, from the anthropomorphization of God to Maimonides' account of creation. The entire text is available in an accessible English translation on Sefaria, but if you are looking for somewhere to start, Maimonides' "Prefatory Remarks," is a good introduction to the larger work.

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