

The Power to Choose: A Founding Moment of Jewish Ethics

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Choice – between right and wrong – is the opening theme of Parashat Re'eh. “See (re'eh), I place before you (lifneikhem) today blessing and curse. Blessing – if you heed God's commands...; curse – if you do not...” (Deut. 11:26). This verse is a portal to the end of Deuteronomy: “See (re'eh) I have placed before you (lifanekha) today life – and the good – and death – and the bad... Life and death I have placed before you – blessing and curse – and you shall choose life...” (Deut. 30:15, 19).

The Israelites stand at the precipice of entering the land (Deut. 11:29) and face the immense challenge of establishing a stable, thriving society. The dramatic shift from a nomadic society protected by God's presence and encamped near the Tabernacle, to an expansive polity, posed profound agricultural, social, political, and religious challenges addressed in the parashah.

It is significant that this foundational moment is framed by the notions of choice and decision. Good legislation is a necessary component of a thriving society – one of the primary preoccupations of Deuteronomy. But a legal system that is good – comprised of God's commandments – is not sufficient. A guiding ethos must undergird the choice to do what is right and good. Ethics is thus a central preoccupation of Deuteronomy, as well.

If it were easy to create a stable, just, thriving society, there would be no need to emphasize choice. However, it is natural for societies to organize around scarcity, competition, and the pursuit of power for survival, as in the “state of nature” described by political philosophers. Deuteronomy thus emphasizes that the good life – even in a well-organized society marked by an excellent legal code – must be repeatedly chosen. Dilemmas abound between

competing desires, needs, and values. A broader ethical vision serves as a guide in those ever-present difficult moments of decision.

The choice presented at the beginning of Parashat Re'eh is presented both in the second person singular (re'eh) and the second person plural (lifneikhem). R. Jacob Ben Asher (13th century) argued that the singular-plural doubling is significant (Baal Ha-Turim, Deut. 14:1). The good life requires coordination among the individual and the collective.

But what guides our choices? In addition to legislation, Deuteronomy is filled with programmatic statements that provide overarching norms to guide our choices more broadly.

For example, Deuteronomy, including this parashah (at Deut. 13:5), is the primary locus of the concept of “walking in God's ways” (vehalakhta bidrakhav). From the Talmud to medieval and modern philosophy *Imitatio Dei* – imitating God – has been a central component of Jewish ethics, emphasizing virtues and ethical acts ascribed to God in biblical narrative (e.g. Talmud B. Sotah 14a, Shabbat 133b).

Ethics is often associated with an orientation toward the other. The infinite worth of all human beings, foundational to ethics, emerges with the creation of the human being in the image of God. The image of God is also found in the self, and there is an intimate interrelationship between self-worth and the worth of all others. This interplay – between an orientation toward the other and the preservation of self-dignity – lies at the heart of Jewish ethics.

Parashat Re'eh gives unique expression to the importance of a theologically-informed fundamental sense of self-worth, at Deut. 14:1: "You are children of the Lord your God – you shall not cut yourselves (lo titgodedu)... [in mourning] over the dead."

In Pirkei Avot, R. Akiva identifies this verse as one of three essential theological-ethical statements in the Bible (Avot 3:14).¹ The verse includes a broader value statement that results in a norm. The broader concept is the idea of being the children of God, which dignifies the Jewish people, who must, in turn, preserve their own dignity and self-worth (R. Samson Raphael Hirsch [19th century], Commentary on the Pentateuch, Deut. 14:1). The norm is a commandment against self-harm. In moments of crisis, when one feels broken, there is a temptation to externalize and literally embody that brokenness.

In the development of Jewish law, two distinct commandments emerged from the single statement "you shall not cut yourselves." The first is the principle against physical harm to the body of the individual. The second, derived from rabbinic exegesis (Talmud B. Yevamot 14a), is a prohibition against dividing the body politic into polarized factions governed by separate legal courts. Polarization emerges at moments of profound crisis within the polis, where the temptation becomes great to display this brokenness by fracturing fundamental institutions – creating separate legal frameworks. R. Judah Loew (Maharal) of Prague (16th century) noted that extreme civil discord fractures the collective, and the individual citizen, too, feels "as if" their own "body is broken apart" (Gur Aryeh on Deut. 14:1).

Deut. 14:1 teaches that neither the body of the individual nor the body politic may be cut up if an individual or society is to thrive. Something about being God's children is a call to remain whole – to self-preservation. This is an unconditional status (R. Meir's on Deut. 14:1, Kiddushin 36a) that implies being loved and valued always. This knowledge is central to the good life.

Being God's children is always simultaneous with being created in God's image alongside all creatures (Avot 3:14).

An ethic of self-preservation is intimately intertwined with an ethic of the dignity of all. Neither can be forgone if a society and the individuals who comprise it are to have any hope of achieving the "good life."

In Parashat Re'eh, at the precipice of forming a stable and permanent civil society in their promised land, the civil and political founding is accompanied by an ethical founding. The call to self-dignity and self-preservation of Deut. 14:1 is immediately followed by a call to holiness: "For you are a holy people unto the Lord, your God..." (Deut. 14:2).

These verses transport the Israelites back to Leviticus 19, another founding moment of Jewish ethics. "Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19:2) is an earlier articulation of the notion of imitatio Dei – a call to a life that mimics God's holiness. Leviticus 19 also includes the prohibition against self-harm (19:28) as well as the command to "love the neighbor as yourself" (19:18) and its parallel command to "love the stranger as yourself" (19:34).

Parashat Re'eh opens with the rallying cry of the second half of Deuteronomy – the call to choose "the blessing." Central to the good life is a deep sense of self-worth, self-dignity, and a commitment to self-preservation. This follows from being the beloved children of God. A thriving community also requires an ethos of the dignity of neighbor and stranger, also created in the image of God. At times of crisis, there is a temptation both to fracture the community and overlook the dignity of the other. It can feel impossible to choose the "blessing" and "the good." The concept of choice was developed in Deuteronomy at a crucial foundational moment. At the cusp of a new life, fear of the unknown and awareness of the profound challenges that lay ahead were countered with the formulation of guiding values and a persistent belief in the power to choose. Let's use this month to practice—to walk after God, to feel reverence, to guard the mitzvot, to listen for the Voice, to serve, and to cling. With God's help, our practice will lead to great joy and love.

¹ The others are Gen. 9:6 (prohibiting murder on account of the creation of the human being in the image of God), and Prov. 4:2 (declaring the Torah a good teaching not to be forsaken).