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Shaping Jewish Law: A Joint Process

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Joe Rashba (Step) ('10) is beginning his second year as a Research Analyst at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York. He got married in June and is enjoying married life in NYC, especially his occasional dog-sitting stints.

I recently had a conversation with a friend about how we relate towards halachot that make us uncomfortable. He argued that if we simply accept them as truth and follow them in full faith, they will bring us deep joy and meaning. I argued that while this may be true, a genuine commitment to Halacha requires us to bring our full selves and work towards reconciling and ideally integrating our values with our practices. I have to recognize, however, that this path leads to endless doubts and inner conflicts. This week's Torah Portion, Re'eh, I think offers several different models of how to relate to Jewish laws and practices.

The portion opens with the following verses: "See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandment of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God..." This model of direct reward and punishment for our actions is powerful and enticing, but hard for us to buy into in a period in which we don't see God's actions in our lives. Over the course of the next five chapters, many laws are laid out that are hard to rationalize, such as which animals to eat

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and not eat, and this system seems like the most compelling argument for keeping them. For those with complete and unfaltering faith in God's power this model is powerful, whether one reads these rewards as concrete rewards or even as the benefit of knowing one is fulfilling God's true desires, as I discussed in the conversation with my friend.

On the other hand, Re'eh also includes many laws which naturally fit with our values and beliefs. For example, it includes the laws of tithes, directing the Jews to leave the corners of their fields for those who are hungry. A slightly different example is the commandment to not consume the blood of an animal. This law does not seem to naturally follow from one's beliefs, but the verse tries to frame it in terms of our values: "But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh." In some cases, even when the law doesn't seem obvious, the Torah attempts to use logic and reason to encourage the Jewish people to follow the practice.

These two models, one of following laws which please God in search of reward and one of following them because they fit our innate sense of right and wrong, represent my relationship towards many of the Mitzvot, however neither suffices on its own. This leaves us with the question of how we move forward and develop a sustainable practice. Deuteronomy chapter 13, verse 1 reads "Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it." The text commands us to follow the laws as they are, suggesting we change our attitudes towards the laws rather than changing the law. However, Judaism is also shaped by the Jewish people and their actions, as demonstrated by a Midrash presented in Rabbi Avital Hochstein's D'var Torah this week. Deuteronomy chapter 12, verses 5 reads: "But look only to the site that YHVH your God will choose amidst all your tribes as His habitation; seek his resting place, and go there." Unlike the other nations, God will determine where the Jewish people will worship and offer sacrifices. The Sifrei, a Tannaitic (2nd century) Midrash, says on this verse that though God chooses the place, we have a role in determining it: "But to the place that the Lord your G-d will choose of all your tribes': by word of a prophet. I might think, wait until a prophet tells you; it is, therefore, written 'His dwelling shall you seek and you shall come there': Seek to find it and then the prophet will tell you." Though the verse from Deuteronomy tells the Jewish people

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to go to the place that God determines, the Midrash instead instructs the Jewish people to seek out the place themselves and seems to suggest that God's choice of location may depend on the choices of individuals. In my opinion, this process of seeking God's place is the true purpose of the many laws and rituals, and through this process, we are constantly shaping Halacha. God's will may seem predetermined in many parts of the Torah, but the Torah also shows us that God is concerned with our desires and needs, and we help define Judaism every day.

Shabbat Shalom!

Continue the *conversation*. Send Joe your thoughts: joestep93@gmail.com.

P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact stefanie@byfi.org. We look forward to hearing from you.



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