



Where is Your Love, What are Your Priorities? Commentary to Parashat Re'eh

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“Behold, I set before you this day a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you shall listen to the commandments of HaShem your G-d, which I command you this day; and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of HaShem your G-d, but turn aside out of the way which I command you this day, to go after other gods, which you have not known.” (Dev 11;26-28)

One of the first questions I ask any potential student is what is it that he really seeks to accomplish by coming to learn from me. As I am one of the few Sephardi Rabbanim who is willing to teach Kabbalah and Abulafian practices to qualified Orthodox students it is no one other than myself that must decide whether the student has the appropriate high level of moral character and Torah learning necessary to walk this path without causing himself harm to himself. The criteria that I use to ascertain who is ready and who is not is to be found in the underlying message in this week's parasha, Re'eh.

It is no secret that Orthodox Judaism is growing fast. More and more Jews are finding their way back to the Torah lifestyle. Yet, living a life of Torah is an arduous path that requires of one commitment of heart, mind and body. Performance of the mitzvot is the commitment of the body, i.e., one is physically doing what is supposed to be done. Belief in the words of Torah and those of our holy Rabbanim is the commitment the mind.

What then is the commitment of the heart? This is the toughest commitment of them all. This is when an individual's whole emotional character revolves around one thing and one thing alone – the passion of how one can best serve HaShem.

This passion is similar to the passion that a man feels towards a woman. Indeed, Rabbi Eliyahu DeVidas in his Reshit Hokhma (Sha'ar HaAhava, end 4) has said the same type of love that a man feels towards a woman, he must show towards HaShem. If not, the Rav says, then the individual is less than a man.



It is the commitment of passion and the fire of love that is the necessary ingredient for any spiritual pursuit or mystical ascent. In essence and as strange as this may sound, our relationship with HaShem must be spiritually “romantic.” This was the underlying intent of Shlomo HaMelekh when he wrote Shir HaShirim.

Alas, among today's ba'alei teshuva and all the more so those who are born and raised religious (f.f.b.), the number of those who are on fire with emotional passion for HaShem are very few. Most religious individuals today are very committed to their religion, their Rabbanim, the Jewish people and to Torah in all its aspects. Yet, ask someone about how is his or her personal relationship with HaShem and you will receive a very strange look, at least. What kind of question is that, you might be asked? You might be told that such a question sounds like something a Christian would ask, but not a Jew. Regardless of the peculiar and/or insulting responses you might get, pursue the question and get an answer. Nine out of ten times, a Torah observant Jew will not know how to answer and will simply dismiss the matter by saying something benign like “Barukh HaShem.”

Now ask yourself the question, how is your personal relationship with HaShem. We all have such a relationship, yet we do not often think about it. This is what needs to change. We observe so much of our Torah and mitzvot by rote, automatically, often without thinking or sincere devotion that the purpose of our observance, to know HaShem personally, often gets lost in the details. The great Sage Shammai warned us against this in Pirkei Avot. It is this sad state of affairs that is the real reason why Mashiah has not yet come.

Ask yourself this, when you pray, are you merely reciting words, or are you really talking to HaShem?

Are you aware of HaShem's presence? Do you seek such an awareness?

When you pray do you sometimes feel a “Presence” as if someone or thing is standing right behind you? You turn around quickly but nothing is there. You return to pray only to again feel that you are not alone. Have you ever felt this?

Can you feel HaShem when you pray? If these remarks sound foreign to you, then consider just how foreign you look in the eyes of Heaven. Then you should contemplate how far you are from HaShem you really might be and understand why your personal prayers seldom get answered.

When you talk personally to HaShem He hears you and responds. Yet, when you merely offer up words, without any true intent of heart, then your words have no energy in them to enable them to ascend. Your words, therefore, never go anywhere and your prayers are thus never answered.



Rebbe Nahman of Breslov was acutely aware of this problem. He adopted the term Hitbodedut from the prophetic Kabbalah, which is traditionally used to describe one of the most advanced stages of Torah meditation and reinterpreted it to mean simply talking to G-d. He instructed his students that at all times they should be aware of G-d's Presence and to communicate with Him, through speaking, on a regular basis.

This concept is surely as Jewish as one can get. We see throughout the TaNaKh and all later literature of our holy Rabbanim that this is exactly what every prophet, Sage, Rabbi and many laymen used to do. Simply, people talked to G-d and somehow, in their hearts, they felt that, in His own way, G-d spoke back to them. This is the meaning of the pasuk that states, "I place HaShem before me, always." (Psalm 16:8).

It is this foundation of knowing HaShem and having a feeling of His Presence that becomes ever so important in light of the warning against false prophets and teachers.

In Dev. 13:2-12, HaShem warns us that false teachers and lying dreamers will arise to attempt to pervert the true meanings of Torah. It is said that they will produce a sign or a wonder and thus convince people to follow them to worship other gods. We Jews mistakenly believe that we have not seen the likes of this happening since the days of Yeshu HaNotzri (mah shmo).

On the contrary, false teachers and lying dreamers are among us to this day and have succeeded in confusing the hearts and minds of many. Yet, the so-called wonders that some produce today are by no means miraculous. The false dreamers of today deceive many with faulty, but apparently logical arguments. They deceive people by appealing to their sense of modernity. The liars blacken the heart by having people embrace concepts foreign to Torah, all the while telling the people that their "new" philosophies embody the essence and best of everything in Torah. These false dreamers and teachers of today have led the masses of people to "worship" other gods, "that we have not known nor served" (13:3).

The concept of false gods embraces much more than mere overt idolatrous religions. "False gods" also includes the concepts of "foreign" philosophies and doctrines in the realms of politics, economics and society. These include such "biggies" as communism and socialism. Both of these world forms of government advance concepts of politics and economics that are foreign to Torah Judaism.

Even Democracy, as it is practiced in Western secular countries, goes beyond the borders of Torah acceptability once it mandates and permits by Law those things which all nations are forbidden to do under the Sheva Mitzvot D'benei Noah (seven universal



spiritual laws). Even certain aspects of capitalism that include ever-expanding profit margins at the expense of inflated prices violate Torah Laws.

In order for us to survive, our holy Rabbanim have had to seek out and create so many types of heterim (permissions) to find permissible ways for us to live in these G-dless societies. If not for their Divinely ordained wisdom, no Jew would be able to make appropriate accommodations enabling one to conduct business or to participate in many areas of normal society. There would be no allowances made for Shemita (the Sabbatical year) or the like.

Yes, Torah Judaism has been invaded by the philosophies of the world and we all must give thanks to HaShem for our holy Rabbanim who have been granted the spiritual and Halakhic wisdom to steer the mighty ship of Jewish Law through the rocky shores of Gentile influences, without harming or rocking the boat.

Alas, even as our mighty captains faithfully steer our undaunted ship, the storms on the sea of exile grow ever stronger. While our holy Rabbanim have guided us safely through the last few generations and centuries and protected us from the forces of assimilation, nonetheless, these forces grow ever stronger and more subtle. Whenever we are not HaShem centered, then even our religious lives can become contaminated by the concepts of the Gentile world surrounding us.

All too many times, I have been asked to justify to secular Jews and Gentiles, the irreligious and inexcusable behavior of individuals who call themselves Orthodox Jews, yet act in a way that is totally unbecoming of a religious individual.

A few weeks ago a non-Orthodox individual emailed me saying how disgusted he was seeing an Ultra-Orthodox individual with peyos, coat and hat entering into a business that (to put it mildly) promotes immorality.. I responded to him that he should have shamed such a so-called religious individual right there on the spot. Thus he the non-Orthodox person would have done the mitzvah of admonishing and saving his brother Jew.

Alas, this non-Orthodox individual told me that he too entered this forbidden and evil place "to watch what the Orthodox individual was doing." I responded and asked this person whether he himself was married, and if so would he inform his wife about his adventure of watching a religious individual and where it had taken him.

Who is kidding whom? The Orthodox individual did a Hillul HaShem (desecrating G-d's Holy Name) by outwardly appearing as a Jew and publicly performing such an evil deed. Granted our holy Rabbis in the Gemara acknowledge the sometimes overwhelming power of the yetzer hara (the evil inclination) and state that when one cannot overcome



the force of evil, he should put on a disguise and go to a part of town where he will not be recognized and do what he must, so long as the Name of Heaven is not profaned. Now, do not misinterpret this to be permission or justification to do evil. G-d forbid we should think like this! Even such a person who sins in private will have to balance his spiritual account before his master, the Holy One, blessed be He.

When we place our religion or our learning first, before our fear of G-d, then we have no fear of G-d. These sentiments were expressed long ago by one of the most powerful men to have ever lived, Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosah (zt'l). This was a man who was poor as poor can be, yet his every movement, his every action, his every thought, all were centered around how he can best love his master HaShem. It is the inspiration of a Rabbi Hanina Ben Dosah that must spur us on, when we Jews are told to emulate immoral politicians and disgusting characters portrayed in movies and on television.

Parashat Re'eh opens with offering us a choice, a choice between blessing and curse. It is only by our living G-d centered lives that we receive the blessing. Being religious or even being ultra-Orthodox simply is not enough. The pasuk says "I place HaShem before me always." If HaShem is not before you, what is?

True, HaShem is only to be found in Torah and mitzvot, but just because someone has Torah and mitzvot does not mean that they have Yirat Shamayim (the fear of G-d). This is a level of bonding with G-d that must be cultivated over time and with much effort.

Even a G-d centered person may sin, but as the Gemara says, rest assured that he does teshuva immediately! As for the rest of us, to come to know HaShem and to talk with him daily is our most important and pressing mitzvah.

If we can make ourselves HaShem centered individuals that with HaShem in our hearts and in our minds we will be able to recognize the foreign elements of the modern false dreamers and lying teachers. We will be able to reject them and dismiss their influence, thus protecting our children and ourselves. What greater service than this is there to perform? We are HaShem's servants. We belong to HaShem. Let us remember this.