

Re'eh, my birthday parashah, is a huge litany of rules and regulations for building a new society in a new place. Anyone whose birthday falls during the weeks when we read Deuteronomy has a wide array of serious Bar/Bat Mitzvah topics to deal with, and Re'eh contains its share. It's not light reading. But word and grammar aficionado that I am, I have discovered a delightful little birthday present in the first verse of our reading: הַיּוֹם בְּרַבָּה וְהִלְלָה רְאֵה אֲנִי בָּתֵּן לְפָנֶיכֶם (singular form), I set before you (plural form) today a blessing and a curse. Of course, grammar purists like me see the obvious problem in this verse, but I also see an interpretive opportunity – a little hidden lesson to unpack.

First, we have to look at the word רְאֵה *re'eh*, which has a wide variety of meanings connected with vision: seeing, experiencing, prophesying, appearing, showing, perceiving, understanding, looking at one another, vision, mirror/viewing instrument, sharp-eyed bird. According to Samson Raphael Hirsch, who noticed that certain letters of the Hebrew alphabet are related and can be used interchangeably to create related word roots, *re'eh* is related to רָר (casting, shooting at a target), אִר' (fearing, being awesome, being aware of a presence), רעה (tending, pasturing, grazing, being neighborly), but also loosely related to רעע (breaking, being evil – and paying homage, rejoicing loudly).

Do you SEE what I see in this conglomeration as it relates to our parashah? Let's unpack it a bit more. First of all, seeing implies more than just looking. All sighted people see pictures when they read and dream. Many of our languages have expressions for "I see," which implies deep understanding, as well as for "mind's eye" and "mental picture," which denote the ability to visualize concepts as well as objects. Our Torah uses words for seeing and hearing in two distinct ways. *Shema* – listening with all our senses in order to truly understand, is a function of the intellect and requires an impulse from outside through words or sound. *Re'eh*, which requires neither word nor sound, is a deeper understanding that engages emotion and imagination. Now, let's look at that grammatical discrepancy, which, if we view it in the light of *shema yisrael*, is perfectly logical. Verbs in the first paragraph of *shema* are singular – directed to each of us individually; the plural verbs in most of the second and third paragraph address us as a group. Do you see a parallel here, especially pertaining to words related to the root רְאֵה? The success of the group is determined by the choices of its individual members. The first paragraph of *shema* admonishes each of us to listen and understand, but then, we must visualize how to move from theory to practice in our daily lives. Essentially, this means that if each of us accepts our individual responsibility to make good choices, i.e. to act in accordance with the mitzvot, the group as a whole will prosper. If not, it will ultimately be destroyed. Human history is a long, sad story of the rise and fall of civilizations.

Throughout our Torah we have ample opportunity to listen deeply to the words of HaShem, but do we 'see' what we hear? Before reiterating a host of rules and regulations, Moses makes it very clear that we have crucial choices regarding them. Then he immediately warns the people against imitating the practices of the people they will encounter in their new home and against following false prophets and dreamers. Because our eyes can lead us astray, it is vitally important to focus our inner vision on good choices in order to reap blessings and avoid curses. Our ancestors are in the process of establishing a new and unique social order grounded in individual freedom balanced with collective responsibility. They are free to succeed or fail, and they need a clear view of their options in order to steer clear of the many pitfalls they will encounter. To guide their vision, they are given tangible focal points: Worship is to be centralized and its rituals specified. They are to observe the dietary laws. They are to be scrupulous in practicing charity, especially during the *shmittah* year. And to ensure that they remember to be grateful for all they have, rituals for the three harvest (pilgrimage) festivals are outlined with the explicit instruction not to appear before HaShem empty-handed.

The *shalosh regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals in our yearly round of celebrations and commemorations, are visions that build a bridge between past and future. Pesach, our festival of freedom, connects us with our history as slaves and our miraculous rescue; counting the *omer* until Shavuot, which post-Temple became the festival of receiving our Torah, reminds us of our long and difficult trek through the wilderness and our eternal covenant with HaShem; and Sukkot, the festival of ingathering, celebrates the Earth's bounty while reminding us of the precariousness of life. And they all obligate us to live each day with our physical eyes and our inner eyes wide open, so we truly see how to make good, life-sustaining choices, for ourselves and for our descendants from generation to generation. Now, do you see what I see?

Shabbat shalom!