

It goes without saying that our deeds have consequences, both personal and in larger context. And it is equally evident that our deeds are driven by our state of mind, i.e., our emotions, which means that we often simply react to stimuli, momentarily oblivious to the possible outcome. We are complex creatures, subject to myriad influences, but with an instinctive sense of morality. One of the major threads running through our scriptures is the process of honing our inborn morality into a code of ethics, especially concerning our behavior toward our fellow humans as well as toward animals and all of nature. As the tragic failures both in socialism and capitalism have taught us, altruism can neither be legislated, nor is it an intrinsic human characteristic. It must be instilled in us and practiced diligently. Anyone who has actively raised children can attest to that. Two weeks ago, Parashah Re'eh illuminated the close ties between gratitude and joy: gratitude leads to joy when we celebrate and share our blessings with others. Our parashah begins with a long discourse on presenting and sharing tithes and offerings, which is how we are to officially express gratitude. We have arrived in the Promised Land, and have begun to engage in the process of building a society based on justice and equality for all, which involves a goodly portion of altruism. For this undertaking to prosper and endure, it must be carried out by individuals rooted in gratitude. Scientific studies have shown that gratitude is a vital component not only of joy, but also of empathy and resilience. But unfortunately, gratitude is easily overridden by complacency, giving rise to a whole array of unwholesome behaviors that eventually negate empathy and weaken resilience. The brilliant 14th century Muslim historian and political philosopher Ibn Khaldūn developed the theory of *'aṣabiyyah* (social cohesion), which arises in small groups, solidifies through religious ideology, and leads to political supremacy and the emergence of a society. However, the complacency that inevitably accompanies success eventually weakens the ties of *'aṣabiyyah* and leads to the society's downfall and replacement by a newly coalescing group with stronger ties. Sadly, history continues to prove him correct. Long before Ibn Khaldūn, our ancestors realized this fact and put counteracting measures in place. One of the strongest has been inculcating us with the idea that all of us are willing participants in an eternal covenant with HaShem. "You have selected the Lord this day, to be your God, and to walk in His ways, and to observe His statutes, His commandments and His ordinances, and to obey Him. And the Lord has selected you this day to be His treasured people, as He spoke to you, and so that you shall observe all His commandments ..." (26:17-18) This covenant is predicated upon our ability to obey, but curiously enough, Biblical Hebrew has no separate word for this verb. Instead, it uses words built on the root *שמע*. *Sh-m-a* carries a multiplicity of meanings with the common denominator of response. Basically, it means "to hear" – i.e., to receive auditory information. But it also entails paying attention, understanding, and heeding, in other words, listening actively, and then acting upon the received information. "Be silent and listen, Israel! This day you have become a people to the Lord, your God. You shall therefore obey the Lord, your God, and fulfill His commandments and His statutes, which I command you this day." (27:9-10) But we are not ordered to blindly obey; along with the commandments, we receive salient reasons for following them, reasons based on our narratives. Perhaps the most powerful and comprehensive is the commandment to remember that we were once strangers, outsiders, and slaves, coupled with the directive to remember that HaShem delivered us from the burden of slavery into a life of accountability and duty toward others and toward our covenant. The boundaries defined by our laws teach us to respect the dignity of all humans as well as the integrity of all of nature. Tithes and offerings instill in us the sense of gratitude and empathy necessary to offset the lure of complacency, and their corresponding public celebrations nurture our cohesion and our resilience. It is noteworthy that the Torah portions containing graphic depictions of the curses that will befall us if we do not obey the commandments are read immediately before two of our most joyous holidays. The curses in Parashah Bechukotai are read before Shavuot, and now, before Rosh HaShanah, they are reiterated in all their frightening detail. But there is one major difference: The first set of curses is written in the plural, while those in our parashah are addressed to each of us individually. On Shavuot we celebrate standing together at Sinai to receive our Torah, while on Rosh HaShanah we are ready to review and account for our personal transgressions. Collective accountability begins with personal accountability. In Jewish terms, the idiom "One for all, all for one" encompasses all of Jewish life, from altruism to "Cursed be he who misguides a blind person on the way ..." (27:18), which understood allegorically means that we are responsible for admonishing a person in the act of transgressing and guiding them onto a better path. In short, the Talmudic "*Shekol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh* – All Israel are guarantors for one another" (Shevuot 39a) is not just a catchy fundraising slogan; it is the epitome of *'aṣabiyyah*, one of the most important components of the glue that has held us together through blessings and curses from generation to generation.

Shabbat shalom!