

Although the verb re'eh (see) is used at least 400 times in the TaNaKh, the title and first word of our parashah is one of the few times when it is used in all its connotations. In addition to the purely physical act of seeing with the eyes, the root ראה forms words with a wide variety of definitions, such as 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 have commonalities that can be used interchangeably to create interrelated word roots, *re'eh* is related to רה' (casting, shooting at a target), אר' (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). Once again, we “see” that a group of words that at first glance seem only minimally related, actually convey an overarching concept: the principle of awareness, which includes “seeing with our mind’s eye,” the ability to visualize concepts as well as objects. This is precisely what the Israelites must learn to do. Despite all the iterations of the *mitzvot* thus far, people with their limited experience can scarcely begin to visualize the life they are to lead, much less take steps to enact it. They have heard many words, and clear choices have been outlined for them, but learning to consistently make healthy, i.e., Torah-centered choices requires the sort of acute awareness that can only be developed through years of diligent practice. Because the culture they are called upon to create is so unique in their world, their only living examples will be the ones they create themselves. This, of course, is predicated on establishing a strong sense of identity that will deter them from being lured away by the surrounding cultures. For the Israelites, and for many Jews today, key features of identity include food, dress, worship, and how to view and treat the world and its inhabitants. Food choices and preparation pervade and largely define all the other aspects. In 14:3-21, Moses reviews the laws of *kashrut*, emphasizing that although other people are free to eat the foods forbidden to us, we limit our diet as a sign of our special relationship to HaShem. It is noteworthy that the kosher mammals are herbivores, and neither they, nor the kosher birds, are predators. A further aspect of *kashrut* is the strict prohibition against eating blood, which HaShem enacted after the Flood, and thus predates the laws of *kashrut*. “Every moving thing that lives shall be yours to eat; like the green vegetation, I have given you everything. But flesh with its soul, its blood, you shall not eat.” (Genesis 9:3-4) This prohibition is repeated and elaborated three times in Leviticus, and twice in our parashah (12:16, 12:23). It is unique in the ancient world, and its appearance in the Noahide laws makes it, along with the injunction against murder, universally binding, although it is not universally upheld. The rationale for this seemingly arbitrary law is explained in Leviticus and reiterated in our parashah (12:23): The blood contains the soul, the divine essence of all warm-blooded creatures; therefore, it belongs to HaShem. There is a distinct connection between the prohibitions against murder and against eating blood. If we understand that blood is the life and soul of every creature, then we are automatically sensitized to the sanctity of all life and thus less likely to engage in wanton bloodshed. “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul.” (Leviticus 17:11) When we must take an animal’s life, we do so with utmost respect, remembering the significance of its blood. Blood also featured prominently in the priestly investiture of Aaron and his sons, imbuing them with HaShem’s holiness and reminding them of the high behavioral standards they were to uphold. The sacrificial animals brought to the *mishkan* and to the subsequent holy places chosen by HaShem were not wasted; they were eaten after their blood had been drained and properly used. Although the sacrificial rites ended with the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, the laws of *kashrut* and the prohibition against eating blood remain as an eternal reminder of our obligation to respect all life. Living a Jewish life has always required a high degree of awareness that bespeaks every aspect of what ראה entails. It is rooted in awe of HaShem, which opens us to the divine nature of all creation and inspires us to deep gratitude for, and judicious use of what HaShem provides. This is reflected in how we treat our fellow human beings and the earth’s resources, in our compassion for those less fortunate than we are, and in our devotion to causes that benefit all humankind. It is reflected in how we worship, inspired by an awareness of our origins that suffuses our prayers with thanks and praise. Time and again our liturgy reminds us that we are no longer slaves to a temporal monarch, but are instead, grateful servants of the omnipotent, transcendent Heavenly Being Whose very Name we may not utter. It is reflected in the continuing miracle of our existence, to which our eternal covenant obligates us to contribute by passing Torah to the next generation through our words and our actions. Yes, our ancestors have faced many obstacles, but because they have always persisted, we are still here. And now, it is upon us to continue their work.

Shabbat shalom!