

Re'eh, my birthday parashah, is a huge litany of rules and regulations for building a unique society in a new place. We have read much of it in earlier parashiot, but now, as his opening word reveals, Moses' urgency is palpable. Although the word *re'eh* appears at least 400 times in our TaNaKh, our parashah is one of the few places where it is used in all its many connotations. In addition to the physical act of seeing with the eyes, the root ראה forms words 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 believed 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), רא' (fearing, being awesome, being aware of a presence), רעה (tending, pasturing, grazing, being neighborly), but also loosely related to רעע (breaking, being evil, paying homage, rejoicing loudly). After opening his discourse in last week's parashah with the equally multitasking word *eikev*, Moses once again conveys an overarching concept with a single word: *re'eh* – see! This masculine singular imperative implores the Israelites to become aware, to learn to visualize concepts, to see with their “mind's eye.” Despite all the iterations of the *mitzvot* thus far, the Israelites lack the vision to apply them. Clear choices have been outlined for them more than once, but their sense of identity is still not strong enough to withstand the temptations of the surrounding cultures. As the harsh lessons of the Baal Peor debacle begin to fade from memory, they must be completely clear on who they are and what is expected of them. Along with the dire warnings and the reminders about festivals and dietary rules, the laws of *shmitah* are expanded to include remission of debt. Remission of land for the 7<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> years had already outlined in Leviticus 25:1-24, but this is a new and necessary requirement. The use of the “infinitive absolute,” two forms of a verb for special emphasis, makes remission of debt an urgent matter: *fato'ach tiftach* – you shall most certainly open [your hands] appears in 15:8 and is repeated in verse 11, interspersed with *naton titen* – you shall most certainly give – even if you are asked for a loan immediately before the beginning of a *shmitah* year. Talmud Tractate Ketubot 68a teaches, “Anyone who averts his eyes from the obligation of giving charity is as if he engages in idol worship.” But herein lies a dilemma: Altruism is a high ideal, but it is not always easy to pursue in the real world. Although remission of debt is a moral imperative, the needs of both lender and borrower must be taken into account. Lending money right before a *shmitah* year means that the debtor would only repay a small portion of what he borrowed, which could then cause hardship for the creditor. Already in the first Century BCE Hillel the Elder realized that due to increasing urbanization as well as Roman influence, the law needed adjustment if it were to be upheld. Talmud Tractate Gittin 36b: “Hillel saw that the people of the nation refrained from lending to each other, so he arose and instituted the *prozbul*.” Indeed, Hillel found a loophole in Torah law, namely that it refers only to remission of private debt, whereas public debt is not affected. By means of the *prozbul* private debt is transferred to a *bet din*, a religious court, ensuring that the creditor will be repaid while the debtor will receive the help he needs in order to survive. The basic formula is found in Mishna Sheviit 10: “I turn over to you, [insert name], judges of [insert name], that any debt I may have outstanding, I shall collect it whenever I desire,” along with a number of rules and restrictions. Now, the court is the creditor and may collect, and as Rashi commented, “The rich, so they will not lose, and the poor, so they will not have doors slammed in their faces.” This elegant solution was understandably controversial. Talmud Tractate Gittin discusses whether rabbis are permitted to interpret the *mitzvot* at will, and of course opinions varied widely. For example, are the laws of *shmitah* binding only for Israel, or also for the diaspora? Is Hillel's *prozbul* obligatory in perpetuity, or only for his generation? And who has the ultimate power of decision, HaShem or the rabbis? The tragic story of Achnai's oven in Tractate Bava Metzia is a prime example: In a heated dispute over whether a new type of oven construction is ritually clean or unclean, Rabbi Eliezer finds it clean, while his colleagues all disagree. Rabbi Eliezer calls forth miracles to prove his point: a carob tree is uprooted and transplanted, a stream runs backward, the walls of the study hall lean and begin to fall until his rival, Rabbi Yehoshua, stops them, and finally, Eliezer calls forth a *bat kol*, a divine voice to agree with him. But his colleagues remain unconvinced, and when Rabbi Yehoshua quotes Deuteronomy 30:12: “It is not in heaven,” they all agree with him and ostracize Eliezer. The ban was only lifted shortly before his death. In other words, practical *halachah* is decided by the rabbis through majority vote, not through divine decree. The story ends with Rabbi Natan encountering the prophet Elijah years later, and asking him how HaShem reacted to Yehoshua's statement; Elijah answers, “The Holy One of Blessing smiled and said: “My children have triumphed over me.” We are still discussing *prozbul* today and opinions still vary widely. Like Hillel, we relate it to *tikun olam*, repairing the world by taking steps to ensure social justice. Our *mitzvot* are not etched in stone; the principle of *halacha* ensures that they are continually adapted to changing conditions in our world. HaShem gave us our Torah trusting that we will understand how to apply it for the good of all creation. *Aleinu* – it's upon us.

Shabbat shalom!