

Parashat Re'eh

It is not without reason that the Sages have called the book of Devarim 'Mishneh Torah' or Torah repeated, for indeed, as I'm sure you will have noticed over the past few weeks, the first ten chapters of the book of Devarim effectively restate the major events of the previous four books that we began reading last Simchat Torah. While, on the surface and certainly to our modern ears, such a restatement would appear to be a redundancy we must be careful to remember that the generation which stood before Moshe, and which was therefore poised to enter the Land to begin its conquest, was not actually the same generation which had emerged from Egyptian slavery. Rather, Moshe was addressing the sons and daughters of those who had passed through the Sea of Suf but who had then perished in the forty year sojourn through the wilderness. Indeed, the people to whom Moshe spoke in Sefer Devarim had not seen the plagues against Egypt. They had not witnessed the first awesome Pesach when the people had been saved by daubing the blood of the lamb upon the doorposts of their houses. And they had not seen the miraculous deliverance at the Yam Suf when the waters were parted at Moshe's command. If any had been around then it was as mere babes in arms and thus incapable of making any sense of what their infant eyes had once seen. Their formative years had therefore been spent trudging through the desert, witnessing the communal discord, rebellions and defeats which had resulted from their parents' failure to enter the Land. These children had lived in tents their whole lives. They had lived with the harsh daily existence that attends desert domicile. The heat of the day, the cold of the night, the hunger and the thirst. And these children had had to bury their parents, whose graves were now strewn in their thousands across the sands. So now, here, in Parashat Re'eh we find them in the Aravah at the border of the Land, just as their fathers had once stood at Kadesh forty years beforehand. The task before this generation was exactly the same as that which had faced their parents forty years before. They, like their fathers, were about to launch their conquest of Eretz Yisrael.

With the benefit of hindsight we know that all would work out well. We know, because we have all read through to the end of the story, that unlike their fathers this new generation would rise to the challenge and the Land would be conquered. And yet, that this would be so was by no means certain at the moment that Moshe stood to make his address. Indeed, nothing was pre-destined. As Rabbi Akiva says in the Mishnah, "everything is foreseen and permission is granted." This is a curious statement that raises questions relating to that thorny subject of pre-destination and free-will. Does "everything is foreseen" mean that everything is pre-destined? Many people believe so - they believe that their path through life has in fact been pre-ordained. Believers often speak of the importance of finding out God's will for their life. Thus they seek divine assent with regard to whom they should marry, where they should live, where and what they should study at university, what career they should take up - as if God has a timetable mapped out for their lives. According to this point of view it is precisely because God has foreseen that He has pre-ordained, and the purpose of the believer is simply to keep in step with God's timetable. For many the idea of 'being in God's will' is being precisely where He wants you to be at precisely the right time. Which all sounds great - at

Parashat Re'eh

least on paper. But what happens when you get the feeling that things aren't quite working to plan? What happens when the job you chose because you felt God directing you into it turns out to be a stinker or you soon get made redundant? What happens when the spouse you chose because you felt the Heavenly matchmaker saying that he or she was 'the right one' beats, bullies or deserts you? It's at these times that we rightly begin to question what we presumed to be God's will. Many will ask whether they 'heard' right? Did they interpret the so-called 'signs' correctly? Perhaps, so they may think to themselves, they simply wanted to believe that the potential spouse was the right one and they conflated God's will with their desires? Shock horror! Maybe he or she was never God's choice in the first place? Have they then sinned because they have apparently stepped out of what they assumed to be God's pre-ordained will? Should they therefore repent for making the wrong choice? At least some of us will have been there and done that and felt the weight of guilt, fear and panic at having apparently disobeyed God.

Implicit in this reasoning is that (a) God had, in the first place, a pre-determined plan; and that (b) being in the right place at the right time according to the terms of that plan should have led to success. In fact, so many believers use success as a gauge for determining God's will in their life. If everything turns out alright, so the reasoning goes, then the choice that was made was clearly within God's will and vice versa. Moreover, those who adhere to these ideas muster any number of Scriptural verses to support their conviction. Yirmeyah 29:11, for instance, is often cited to this effect: "For I know what plans I have in mind for you," says Adonai, "plans for well-being, not for bad things; so that you can have hope and a future." According to this verse God indeed has a master plan for each individual life which will be indicated by any number of good things happening and which will bring success. Similarly, Yeshayahu 22:22 is often quoted, "I will place the key of David's house on his shoulder; no one will shut what he opens; no one will open what he shuts." In other words, if God wants it to happen then there's nothing you can do to thwart that plan and vice versa. Which, when, for example, you're applying for a job, may be very comforting since. By this logic, the reason you were turned down from other jobs is because God was closing the door to you; and the reason that you landed a particular job is because God finally opened the door to you. But the assumptions that lay behind such thinking are very dangerous indeed. As minister and author Kevin A. Thompson has written, "He made all the right decisions. He dated slowly, chose wisely, did everything I asked of him in pre-marital counseling, and despite all his wise choices, his wife left him just months into the marriage. She made all the right decisions. Three job offers were on the table. Her knowledge and ability was recognized by everyone. She prayed, sought wise counsel, and made the best decision she knew to make. Within the year the company failed and she was without a job. There is a common assumption regarding God's will. It's the belief that success is the ultimate sign of choosing correctly. It's the belief that if you make a decision which honors God, God will honor you with success. It's a dangerous assumption. I hear it as people are:

Parashat Re'eh

Debating which job to take. The assumption is that if they chose the right one they will be happy, make money, and experience tremendous success.

Choosing a spouse. Choose the right one and the marriage is guaranteed to make it.

Making faith decisions. If they obey God, they assume everything will turn out for the best. In part, this is true," he says. "In the end, God will use everything for our good. Yet the end is a long way off, and between now and then we are not guaranteed health, wealth, and success. As a matter of fact, it is very possible to make a wise choice and have a bad outcome."

The idea that success is an indicator of being in God's will is in fact to misunderstand Scripture. Many make appeal to the blessings and curses of this week's portion in support of this view. After all, do we not read that, "I present before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing: that you hearken to the commandments of Hashem your God, that I command you today. And the curse: If you do not hearken to the commandments of Hashem, your God, and you stray from the path that I command you today..." Moreover, do we not also read, "Safeguard and hearken to all these words that I command you, in order that it will be well with you and your children after you forever, when you do what is good and right in the eyes of Hashem your God?" On the surface these verses would lead us to believe that being in 'God's will' will bring ease and success and yet the testimony of Scripture is more complicated than this. The book of Iyov is a case in point. Iyov was a man "blameless and upright; he feared God and shunned evil" and yet his gilded life descended into one of the most indescribable pain and suffering. In fact Iyov's pain was exacerbated by his belief, as indicated by this week's parashah, that prosperity, ease of life and success were indicators of being in God's will. Kohelet too muses on the fact that, contrary to the promises and expectations of our portion, being in God's will does not bring guaranteed ease and success. In fact, he says, "In my pointless life, I've seen everything — from the righteous person perishing in his uprightness to the wicked one who lives a long life and keeps on doing wrong." Needless to say that Kohelet's observations represent an inversion of the promises of our portion. Indeed, Kohelet's observations in this respect are daily borne out by our experiences in the world. The fact is that bad things happen to good people just as much as good things happen to bad people. Doesn't Messiah also tell us in this respect that "[God] makes his sun shine on good and bad people alike, and he sends rain to the righteous and the unrighteous alike." In other words life is completely indiscriminate! It doesn't rain on your metaphorical parade because you're out of God's will and it doesn't shine on it because you're in it. Rather, it's just life and what life throws at us is fundamentally random. Ease of life and success are not therefore indicators of being in God's will. In fact, the story of Yirmeyahu the prophet tells us quite the opposite. He was a man that was called to failure. As Rabbi Michael Lerner, editor of Tikkun magazine, has asked: "Was Jeremiah a failure or a success? By common human standards of success Jeremiah was a failure. Unlike Moses, he did not free his people from slavery and he did not bring them to the Promised Land. Unlike Samuel, he did not crown a King David over them. Unlike Elijah, he did not perform miracles such as

Parashat Re'eh

reviving a dead child or bringing fire down from heaven. Unlike Isaiah, he did not prophesy the defeat of a foreign enemy, namely, Sennacherib, the Assyrian emperor, which came true. He died without any tangible accomplishments and, as was mentioned before, history remembers him as a broken old man who sits on the ruins of Jerusalem and cries (as depicted by many artists, most notably Rembrandt)."

The inclination to believe that God has a pre-determined plan for our lives not only leads to fatalism but originates in our very human fears of the insecurity and impermanence of life on planet earth. Believing that God not only shields those who are "in His will" from those insecurities and that impermanence, but that He also enables them to live at ease and enjoy success in the midst of it, is effectively a subconscious attempt to gain control over our lives and guarantee outcomes. But in doing so we become attached to ideas that are the very antithesis of faith. For faith is by definition what exists in the midst of insecurity - it is what exists when we know little to nothing about the future - when we can only see through a glass darkly. After all, didn't Avraham leave Haran without knowing where he was going? And wasn't this faith accredited to him as righteousness? So too, none of us really knows what will happen in our lives or where we will end up.

In truth there is probably no great pre-ordained plan for our lives - at least as far as we commonly think of such a plan. It has probably not been decided whether or not we should marry or to whom. It has probably not been determined where we ought to live, what we ought to study or what profession we ought to pursue and so on and so forth. Moreover, there is probably no divine shield that protects us against what Hamlet called "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune." It's an incontrovertible fact that in the universe that God created bad things happen to good people and vice versa. All has indeed been foreseen, but that does not mean that all has been pre-ordained, for in the universe that God created human beings have been given the gift of free will. Free will is not to be understood as merely the freedom to co-operate with a pre-scripted timetable or not, but is the ability to make real creative choices about the direction of our lives. According to this then, yes, you *can* choose whom you want to marry; you *can* choose where you want to work; you *can* choose what you want to study; you *can* choose your own career. Indeed, it is a dereliction of faith to expect God to make those choices for us, because faith is not an outsourcing of our human responsibility to God. On the contrary, faith is taking hold of that God-given responsibility and making our decisions in relation to the Torah's moral standards but in the absence of an assumed grand masterplan. Such is God's gift to us as human beings! We are neither divinely controlled puppets acting out pre-scripted lives, nor are we frantic commuters through life who must desperately try to keep up with a divine timetable. The choice, as Moshe says in our parashah, is genuinely ours. Thus, "everything is foreseen and permission is granted."

What does "everything is foreseen" mean then if not that everything has been pre-destined? As Dr. Avraham Alkayam reports, "The Mishnah commentator R. Obadiah of Bertinoro

Parashat Re'eh

(commonly pronounced Bartenura), and, following his lead, the late scholar of Rabbinic thought, Prof. E.E.Urbach, explained it as "everything is seen", that is, the Lord sees "everything that man does, even if done in complete privacy". By this same token "Permission is granted" means that man is permitted to make his own decisions in life. After all, if this were not so and everything has been pre-determined, asks the Rambam, how can human beings be expected to repent? For, as the Rambam says, "Freedom is given to every man to direct himself to the path of good and he has the freedom to be a righteous man, and if he wants to direct himself to the path of evil and be an evil man, he may do so" (Sefer Hamada, Hilchot Teshuvah, chap. 5, halachah 1); "...Since we have freedom to choose and all the evil we have done was by our own choosing, it is proper for us to repent and to leave our evil ways for we now have the freedom of choice to do so, as it is written (in Lamentations 3:40): ' Let us search and examine our ways and return to the Lord' " (ibid., halachah 2); "Since every man has freedom of choice given to him as we have explained - one should strive for repentance" (ibid. chap.7, halachah 1)."

Of course it's not quite true to say that God has no will. Indeed He does! It's just that His will is not as we have heard is commonly conceived. God may not have determined whether you should be a ballet dancer, a teacher, a builder or a footballer, and He may have given us the free will to shape our own destinies, but what He does care about is that the decisions we make are moral ones. To this extent it is entirely appropriate to speak about 'the will of God'. It is God's will that whatever choices we make in life we always do the right thing. Such is the righteous path that is set before us all in His Torah. It is His will that we all "love the Lord with all our heart, mind and might" and that we love our neighbour as ourselves. It is His will that we conduct our lives with compassion and empathy, and that we pursue justice and exercise mercy. In this respect while we may indeed choose between obedience and disobedience, for "permission is granted," we are to be aware that such choices are indeed determinate. Therefore Yeshua said, "Don't judge, so that you won't be judged. For the way you judge others is how you will be judged — the measure with which you measure out will be used to measure to you." We may indeed have freedom to determine the course of our lives in this present age, but we are also to remember that what we do in life echoes through eternity. The fast approaching High Holy Days remind us in this respect that the God who gave us the gift of life, the gift of free will and the choice between good and evil, will recompense us for those choices. In the end evil will indeed be punished and good will be rewarded. As Messiah has taught us:

"When the Son of Man comes in his glory, accompanied by all the angels, he will sit on his glorious throne. All the nations will be assembled before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The 'sheep' he will place at his right hand and the 'goats' at his left. Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you whom my Father has blessed, take your inheritance, the Kingdom prepared for you from the founding of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you made me your guest, I needed clothes and

Parashat Re'eh

you provided them, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' Then the people who have done what God wants will reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and make you our guest, or needing clothes and provide them? When did we see you sick or in prison, and visit you?' The King will say to them, 'Yes! I tell you that whenever you did these things for one of the least important of these brothers of mine, you did them for me!' "Then he will also speak to those on his left, saying, 'Get away from me, you who are cursed! Go off into the fire prepared for the Adversary and his angels! For I was hungry and you gave me no food, thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, a stranger and you did not welcome me, needing clothes and you did not give them to me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they too will reply, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, a stranger, needing clothes, sick or in prison, and not take care of you?' And he will answer them, 'Yes! I tell you that whenever you refused to do it for the least important of these people, you refused to do it for me!' They will go off to eternal punishment, but those who have done what God wants will go to eternal life.'"