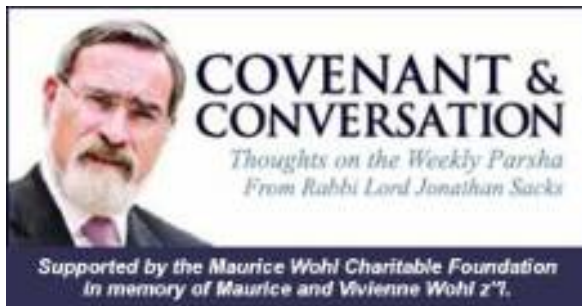


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On Leadership: Defining Reality

One of the gifts of great leaders, and one from which each of us can learn, is that they *frame reality for the group*. They define its situation. They specify its aims. They articulate its choices. They tell us where we are and where we are going in a way no satellite navigation system could. They show us the map and the destination, and help us see why we should choose this route not that. That is one of their most magisterial roles, and no one did it more powerfully than did Moses in the book of Deuteronomy.

Here is how he does it at the beginning of this week's parsha:

See, I am setting before you today the blessing and the curse- the

blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known. (Deut. 11:26-28)

Here, in even more powerful words, is how he puts it later in the book:

See, I set before you today life and the good, death and the bad... This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Therefore choose life so you and your children after you may live. (Deut. 30:15,19)

What Moses is doing here is *defining reality* for the next generation and for all generations. He is doing so as a preface to what is about to follow in the next many chapters, namely a systematic restatement of Jewish law covering all aspects of life for the new nation in its land.

Moses does not want the people to lose the big picture by being overwhelmed by the details. Jewish law with its 613 commands is detailed. It aims at the sanctification of all aspects of life, from daily ritual to the very structure of society and its institutions. Its aim is to shape a social world in which we turn even seemingly secular occasions into encounters with the Divine presence. Despite the details, says Moses, the choice I set before you is really quite simple.

We, he tells the next generation, are unique. We are a small nation. We have not the numbers, the wealth nor the sophisticated weaponry of the great empires. We are smaller even than many of our neighbouring nations. As of now we do

not even have a land. But we are different, and that difference defines once-and-for-all who we are and why. God has chosen to make us His stake in history. He set us free from slavery and took us as His own covenantal partner.

This is not because of our merits. "It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land" (Deut. 9:5). We are not more righteous than others, said Moses. It is because our ancestors - Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah - were the first people to heed the call of the one God and follow him, worshipping not nature but the Creator of nature, not power but justice and compassion, not hierarchy but a society of equal dignity that includes within its ambit of concern the widow, the orphan and the stranger.

Do not think, says Moses, that we can survive as a nation among nations, worshipping what they worship and living as they live. If we do, we will be subject to the universal law that has governed the fate of nations from the dawn of civilization to today. Nations are born, they grow, they flourish, they become complacent, then corrupt, then divided, then defeated, then they die, to be remembered only in history books and museums. In the case of Israel, small and intensely vulnerable, that fate will happen sooner rather than later. That is what Moses calls "the curse."

The alternative is simple - even though it is demanding and detailed. It means taking God as our sovereign, judge of our deeds, framer of our laws, author of our liberty, defender of our destiny, object of our worship and our love. If we predicate our existence on something - some One - vastly greater than ourselves then we will

be lifted higher than we could reach by ourselves. But that needs total loyalty to God and His law. That is the only way we will avoid decay, decline and defeat.

There is nothing puritanical about this vision. Two of the key words of Deuteronomy are *love* and *joy*. The word "love" (the root *a-h-v*) appears twice in Exodus, twice in Leviticus, not all in Numbers, but 23 times in Deuteronomy. The word "joy" (root *s-m-ch*) appears only once in Genesis, once in Exodus, once in Leviticus, once in Numbers but twelve times in Deuteronomy. Moses does not hide the fact, though, that life under the covenant will be demanding. Neither love nor joy come on a social scale without codes of self-restraint and commitment to the common good.

Moses knows that people often think and act in short-term ways, preferring today's pleasure to tomorrow's happiness, personal advantage to the good of society as a whole. They do foolish things, individually and collectively. So throughout Devarim he insists time and again that the road to long-term flourishing - the 'good,' the 'blessing,' life itself - consists in making one simple choice: accept God as your sovereign, do His will, and blessings will follow. If not, sooner or later you will be conquered and dispersed and you will suffer more than you can imagine. Thus Moses defined reality for the Israelites of his time and all time.

What has this to do with leadership? The answer is that the meaning of events is never self-evident. It is always subject to interpretation. Sometimes, out of folly or fear or failure of imagination, leaders get it wrong. Neville Chamberlain defined the challenge of the rise to power of Nazi Germany as the search for "peace

in our time." It took a Churchill to realise that this was wrong, and that the real challenge was the defence of liberty against tyranny.

In Lincoln's day there were any number of people for and against slavery but it took Lincoln to define the abolition of slavery as the necessary step to the preservation of the union. It was that larger vision that allowed him to say, in the Second Inaugural, "With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds ..." He allowed neither abolition itself, nor the end of the Civil War, to be seen as a victory for one side over the other but instead defined it as a victory for the nation as a whole.

I explained in my book on religion and science, *The Great Partnership*, that there is a difference between the *cause* of something and its *meaning*. The search for causes is the task of *explanation*. The search for meaning is the work of *interpretation*. Science can explain but it cannot interpret. Were the ten plagues in Egypt a natural sequence of events, or Divine punishment, or both? There is no scientific experiment that could resolve this question. Was the division of the Red Sea a Divine intervention in history or a freak easterly wind exposing a submerged and ancient river bank? Was the Exodus an act of Divine liberation or a series of lucky coincidences that allowed a group of fugitive slaves to escape? When all the causal explanations have been given, the quality of miracle - an epoch-changing event in which we see the hand of God - remains. Culture is not nature. There are causes in nature, but only in culture are there meanings. Homo sapiens is uniquely the culture-creating, meaning-seeking

animal, and this affects all we do.

Viktor Frankl, the psychotherapist who survived Auschwitz, used to emphasize that our lives are determined not by what happens to us but by how we respond to what happens to us - and how we respond depends on how we interpret events. Is this disaster the end of my world or is it life calling on me to exercise heroic strength so that I can survive and help others to survive? The same circumstances may be interpreted differently by two people, leading one to despair, the other to heroic endurance. The facts may be the same but the meanings are diametrically different. How we interpret the world affects how we respond to the world, and it is our responses that shape our lives, individually and collectively.

That is why, in the famous words of Max De Pree, "The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality."¹

Within every family, every community, and every organisation, there are trials, tests and tribulations. Do these lead to arguments, blame and recrimination? Or does the group see them providentially, as a route to some future good (a "descent that leads to an ascent" as the Lubavitcher Rebbe always used to say)? Does it work together to meet the challenge? Much, perhaps all, will depend on how the group defines its reality. This in turn will depend on the leadership or absence of leadership that it has had until now. Strong families and communities have a clear sense of what their ideals are, and they are not blown off-course by the winds of change.

No one did this more powerfully than Moses in the way he monumentally framed the choice: between good and bad, life and death, the

blessing and the curse, following God on the one hand, or choosing the values of neighbouring civilizations on the other. That clarity is why the Hittites, Canaanites, Perizzites and Jebusites are no more, while the people of Israel still lives, despite an unparalleled history of circumstantial change.

Who are we? Where are we? What are we trying to achieve and what kind of people do we aspire to be? These are the questions leaders help the group ask and answer, and when a group does so together it is blessed with exceptional resilience and strength.

1. Max De Pree, *Leadership is an Art*, New York, Doubleday, 1989.



Charity and Self-Respect

Devarim, 15:7-8: “When there will be among you a destitute person from one of your brothers in one of your gates in your land which Hashem, your God gives to you, you will give to him; do not harden your heart and do not close your hand from your destitute brother. Rather, you will surely open your hand to him, and you will surely lend him **that which is lacking to him.**”

Rashi, Devarim, 15:8, Dh: “Even a horse to ride on it and a servant to run in front of him.”

The Torah instructs us to give charity and ends with an enigmatic command to give the poor person “that which is lacking to him”. Rashi briefly explains, based on a Talmud¹, that this teaches that one must even give the poor person a horse to ride on and a servant to run in front of it.

The Talmud elaborates that normally one does not need to give a poor person so much money that he will become rich, rather one should provide him with what he is lacking, such as basic needs. However, in the case of a person who was wealthy and then lost all of his wealth, the Torah is teaching that one must provide for him those things that he feels lacking now when compared to when he was wealthy.²

To demonstrate, the Talmud brings the case of a wealthy person who was used to riding on a horse and having servants run in front of him. After he lost all of his money, Hillel raised money to pay for him to still ride a horse and have servants run in front of him. On one occasion, there was no servant available so Hillel himself ran in front of the poor man, despite the fact that Hillel was a Torah Sage.

The commentaries ask a very strong question on Hillel’s action: In Its discussion of the laws of returning lost objects), the Talmud in Bava Metsia teaches the concept of a ‘*Zakein v’eino lefi kevodo*’ – this means that a Torah Sage is exempt from the mitzvah of returning lost objects when returning the lost item would appear beneath his dignity – for example, to bring a stray sheep back to its owner would be inappropriate for a Torah Sage. The Rosh³ rules that not only is the Sage exempt from returning lost objects but he is prohibited from going beyond the letter of the law to return the object,

because it is considered degrading to his status as a Sage.

Accordingly, how could Hillel run in front of the poor person in place of servants – this was surely something beneath his dignity as a Sage?

Rabbi Chaim Shmuelevitz addresses this question. He explains that the reason that this recently impoverished person needed to ride a horse and to have servants run in front of him, was because of the honor that it gave to him. Rabbi Shmuelevitz writes that in normal circumstances it would indeed be forbidden for Hillel to degrade himself by running in front of this person, even if it constituted the mitzvah of charity. However, Rav Shmuelevitz asserts that it must be this person's need for honor was so great that it reached the level of being life-threatening. Hillel was concerned that if this person did not have his insatiable need for honor satisfied, then his very life was at risk. Therefore, it was permitted for Hillel to degrade himself in such a way that was normally forbidden.⁴

We learn from Rabbi Shmuelevitz how essential honor is for people – this reminds us that when giving charity, the honor of the recipient must be foremost in one's mind, not just the fact that one is giving him something. We have discussed examples of the exemplary kindness of Rabbi Shimshon Pincus. Yet, while giving lavishly to others, he was always highly sensitive to the honor of the recipients and how on occasion, maintaining the self-dignity of the recipients overrode limitless giving, as is demonstrated by the following story.⁵

Once, a group of fundraisers raised money for a family in the community that had suffered several consecutive tragedies and was in deep

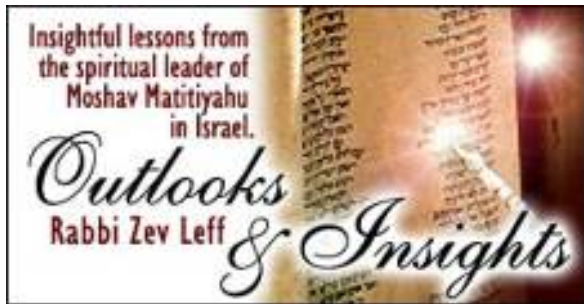
financial straits. When the family had to move to a larger city for a short period of time, the fundraisers sought to take advantage of the opportunity to launch a massive charity campaign to inform the public of their dire situation and raise deeply needed funds.

They approached Rabbi Pincus for his endorsement but were met with a surprising reaction: “They will be humiliated to death... How can you do such a thing? These are people with terrible suffering and everyone will know exactly who you're talking about. They'll never be able to show their faces in public again!”

Rav Pincus was teaching that tzedakah may never compromise the self-respect of a fellow Jew, and every Mitzva must be measured on the scale of Torah, with the utmost sensitivity to the other person's needs.

May we all merit to emulate the examples of Hillel and Rabbi Pincus.

1. Kesubos, 67b.
2. My Rebbe, Rabbi Yitzchak Berkovits, Rosh Yeshiva of Aish HaTorah, suggests that this halacha does not mean that one must continue supporting this poor person on such a level on a permanent basis, rather until he adapts to his new situation.
3. Bava Metsia, Chapter 2, Simun 21.
4. Rabbi Yosef Shalom Elyashiv offers a totally different answer. He explains that Hillel hid his identity when he ran in front of the poor person. It seems that Rabbi Elyashiv understands that the prohibition for a Sage to go beyond the letter of the law when he is exempt, only applies when it is not recognizable that he is doing a Mitzva, such as in the case of returning a lost object, because it looks bad to onlookers that the Sage is doing something beneath his dignity for no apparent reason. In a similar vein, if onlookers do not know that the person doing this Mitzva is a Sage, then there is no harm done to his honor or the honor of the Torah.
5. “The Life of Rav Shimshon Dovid Pincus”, pp.221-222. See pp.222-224 for other stories in this vein.



The Love of Kindness

"Grant truth to Jacob, kindness to Abraham, as you swore to our forefathers from ancient times." (Micha 7:20)

In the first, second, fourth, and fifth years of the seven-year Shmitah cycle, Jews living in Israel were commanded to separate a tenth of their crops and bring them to Jerusalem to eat (*ma'aser sheni*). In the third and six years of the cycle, that tenth was given to the poor as *ma'aser ani*.

At first glance, it would seem that the order of *ma'aser sheni* and *ma'aser ani* should have been reversed. Why were the landowners not required to first share with the poor and only subsequently to enjoy their produce in Jerusalem. In other words, why was *ma'aser ani* not given at the beginning of the three-year cycle, and only then *ma'aser sheni*?

Maimonides (Gifts to the Poor 10:2) writes that one must give *tzedakah* with a joyous countenance, and that giving with a disgruntled mien negates the mitzvah. Thus we see that the attitude with which one gives *tzedakah* is intrinsic to the mitzvah itself.

The prophet Michah (5:17) defines that which God wants from us as *"to do justice, love chesed (kindness), and walk modestly with God."* And in the concluding blessing of the

Amidah we thank God for giving us, *"through the light of His countenance a Torah of life and a love of chesed."* It is not enough to do *chesed*. One must love *chesed*.

More than any other positive mitzvah, writes Maimonides, *tzedakah* is a sign of the essence of a Jew. It is the very fiber of Jewish existence and the source of our future redemption. Similarly, a good heart, which is the basis of all good character traits (Avot 2:13), refers to an attitude which fosters *chesed*.

GOD'S FOOTSTEPS

The goal of our striving in this world is the perfection of our souls. The mitzvot are the means to achieving this goal. There are two mitzvot which enable us to emulate God as He relates to us. One is Torah study. Through the study of Torah we attach ourselves to God's mind, as it were, as He created the world.

The second is *chesed*. The basis of all existence is God's desire to do *chesed* to His creation. Hence, when we do acts of *chesed* with a strong desire, we follow in God's footsteps.

Abraham discovered God through the characteristic of *chesed* of recognizing the *chesed* inherent in the creation. He so longed to perform acts of *chesed*, that even when he sat in great agony after his own *brit milah*, he suffered when no guests appeared. Our mother Rivka, too, was distinguished by her love of *chesed*. It was for that quality alone that Eliezer tested her.

We are now prepared to understand the order of *ma'aser sheni* and *ma'aser ani*. By commanding us to bring one-tenth of our crops to Jerusalem to rejoice there, God taught us two vital lessons. The first is that our material possessions are a present from God and He can dictate how we

use that material bounty. The second is that using material wealth in the way prescribed by God generates feelings of joy and sanctity.

Once we have internalized these lessons in the first two years of the cycle, we can offer that bounty to the poor in the third year – not perfunctorily, but with a true love of *chesed*.

The letters of Elul hint to the verse, "*I am to my Beloved and my Beloved is to me,*" signifying our intensified relationship with God leading up to the High Holidays. To achieve this we must condition ourselves not only to do *chesed*, but to love it.



The Mind's Eye

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

In the opening verse of this week's parsha, Moses speaks to the Jewish people and says, "See (*re'eh*), I have set before you today a blessing and a curse" (Deut. 11:26). The word "*re'eh*" seems out of place here. Moses is not *showing* anything to the people; he is merely informing them about the consequences of their actions! Why does the Torah present this information in terms of "seeing," when it would have made more sense to use the idea of "hearing"?

Later in the parsha, the verse instructs us "to do what is good and upright in the eyes of God"

(Deut. 12:28). Rashi (quoting the Midrash Sifri) divides this verse into two parts: the word "good" (*tov*) refers to doing good in the eyes of God, whereas the word "upright" (*yashar*) refers to acting righteously in the eyes of other people. This is a very puzzling comment. Since the verse itself links both of these qualities ("good" and "upright") to God, how can the Midrash claim that the word "upright" refers to other people? This seems contrary to the literal meaning of the text!

A passage in the Talmud (Brachot 28b) will help us resolve both difficulties:

The students of Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai came to visit him when he was on his deathbed. They gathered around their teacher and requested a blessing. Rabbi Yochanan replied, "May it be God's will that your fear of Heaven be *as great* as your fear of people." This unusual blessing surprised the students: "Is that all?" they exclaimed. It would seem that a person's fear of God should be *even greater* than his fear of people! Rabbi Yochanan responded: "You should know that when a person commits a crime, his first thought is always, 'Did anybody see me?'"

This Talmudic passage provides an insight into the Midrash's division of the verse in Parshat Re'eh. The Torah counsels, "Do what is good and upright in the eyes of God." But how are we to know what is "good" in God's eyes? The seemingly superfluous word "upright" is included in the verse to teach us the following lesson. We do what is good in the eyes of God by imagining what our conduct would be if we were in the presence of important people. Acting righteously, with other people in mind, is a prerequisite to pleasing to the Divine. This

interpretation does not contradict the literal meaning of the verse; rather, it teaches us an approach we must take in our daily lives to help ensure that we are doing what is "good in God's eyes."

VIVID IMAGE

Now we can understand the use of the word "*re'eh*" in terms of this idea. The Talmud teaches, "Who is wise? One who sees the future" (Tamid 32a). It is interesting that the Talmud does not attribute wisdom to one who *knows* the future. Instead, the word "see" is used. This teaches us an important lesson. A person who *knows* what will happen may not change his behavior - but a person who vividly *sees*, with his mind's eye, the potential outcome of his actions, may choose to act differently.

(We all know that our time on earth is finite, yet this *knowledge* of our own mortality rarely spurs us to make positive changes in our lives. However, if we were to *see*, in our imagination, the actual moment of our death, that frightening vision of stretchers and paramedics would make us aware of our true priorities far more powerfully than mere knowledge!)

This is why Moses uses the word "*re'eh*" in addressing the Jewish people. Moses does not want the people simply to *listen* to his words - he wants them to vividly imagine the results of obeying or disobeying them.

May we all be blessed with a dynamic imagination that will lead us to an awareness of God's Presence. May we use our vision to truly see the ramifications of our action, speech and thought so that we can live our lives according to what is good and upright in God's eyes.

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