

Torah From a Mussar Perspective
***Parshat Re'eh* – Deuteronomy 11:26 - 16:17**
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One of the things which has struck me over my years of studying the teachings of our tradition through a Mussar lens is how keenly relevant and resonant those teachings can be in our time. This, in spite of being far removed we are from the period of their composition.

For example, I recall the years during which my *hevruta* partner and I closely studied *Orchot Tzaddikim* – “The Paths of the Righteous.” The authorship of this *Mussar* text is generally viewed as anonymous. The work is believed to have come to light in 15th century Germany. In the years of our study of *Orchot Tzaddikim* (roughly 2014-2016) we would meet in a public library midway between our homes. On my way to our study session, I would often listen to the morning news. Then we would spend our 90 minutes together, and invariably I found myself remarking, “This author read the paper this morning, or at least listened to the news – he’s talking about our time.” By that I did not take it as the author commenting on current events, per se. Rather, I came to realize that human nature has not changed much over the millennia. However, technology and the realities of life do change. As we studied, I could not help but feel as if *Orchot Tzaddikim* was speaking directly to something very relevant to the day on which we were studying any given passage.

The more I dove into the teachings of our *Mussar* tradition, the more I saw and felt these resonances. And again -- this week!

In our Torah portion this *Shabbat*, *Parshat Re'eh*, we read:

וְנִתְצְתָם אֶת־מִזְבְּחֵיהֶם וְשִׁבְרֵתֶם אֶת־מַצְבְּתֵיהֶם וְאֲשֵׁרִייהֶם תִּשְׂרֹפוּן בָּאֵשׁ וּפְסִילֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם
תִּגְדְּעוּן וְאִבְדָּתֶם אֶת־שְׁמֵם מִן־הַמָּקוֹם הַהוּא:

Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire,
and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site.

לֹא־תַעֲשׂוּן כֵּן לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

Do not worship your Eternal God in like manner.¹

As I studied this week’s *parashah* through the lens of various *Mussar* texts I heard loud resonances with our complicated and tumultuous times. One teaching caught my attention as I studied Rabbi Moshe Igbi’s masterful anthology, *Chochmat HaMatzpun* (The Wisdom of the

¹ Deuteronomy 12:3-4

Conscience.)² The teaching Rav Igbui cites is from Rabbi Aharon Kotler.³ Reflecting on the verses above, Rav Kotler offers a discourse⁴ I found quite resonant. Here is a bit of his teaching. He begins by citing Rashi:

Rashi, cites the *Sifrei* where we are taught: Rabbi Yishmael said: “But can the idea enter your mind that the Israelites would pull down the altars of God?” But the meaning of לא תעשון כן /*lo ta’asun keyn* – “Do not worship [your Eternal God] in like manner” is that you should not do as [the other nations] do lest that your sins cause the Sanctuary of (built by) your ancestors to be [likewise] laid waste.⁵

Rav Kotler then proceeds to cite the *Talmud*:

In the *Gemara*⁶ it states regarding this verse “You shall not do so” (*lo ta’asun*): only an actual ‘action’ is forbidden, but causation (*grama* - indirect causation) is permitted. If so, how can we interpret this verse as referring to an indirect causation of the destruction of the Temple through sinful deeds?

He continues with a metaphor:

It is not the snake that kills [with poison], but rather the sin [that one commits] that kills. So it is with all punishments. When a person commits a sinful act, by that act they create a spiritual force which is what punishes them. Even though a long time may pass from the commission of the sin until the punishment comes, this is due to God’s Divine attribute of being *long-suffering* (*erech apayim*). That delay restrains the spiritual force created [as a result of] the sin from acting immediately, in order to allow the possibility of *teshuvah*/repentance, as well as to leave room for free will [which from a *Mussar* perspective we would link with the concept of *bechirah*/choice.] [We can see this in] *Tomer Devorah*,⁷ chapter 1, in the explanation of the attribute of

² I am grateful to my teachers Alan Morinis and Rabbi Avi Fertig for making me aware of this work about 6 years ago. *Chochmat HaMatzpun* draws on classic *mussar* teachings—citing sources like Rav Salanter, the Alter of Kelm, the Alter of Slabodka, and myriad other sources, to stress the importance of *middot*. Rabbi Igbui’s intention is to enhance our deep self-reflection and spiritual growth. The work has become a valuable source for *mussar* study and Torah ethics, connecting classical Jewish wisdom with practical guidance for everyday life.

³ Rabbi Aharon Kotler (1892-1962) was a prominent rabbinic leader in Lithuania and in the United States, where he founded *Bet Medrash Govoha* in Lakewood Township, New Jersey. He studied in the Slabodka yeshiva in Lithuania under Nosson Tzvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka. His works are found primarily in *Mishnat Rabbi Aharon*.

⁴ As cited in *Chochmat HaMatzpun, Devarim 1*, page 448ff.

⁵ *Sifrei Devarim 61:7*.

⁶ *Shabbat 120a*.

⁷ *Tomer Devorah* was written by Rabbi Moshe Cordovero (RaMaK), who was among the major kabbalists of 16th-century *Tsfat*. *Tomer Devorah* is an *mussar* treatise which promotes *imitatio Dei*, imitating the Divine. *Tomer Devorah* presents the attributes of God and explains how to improve oneself by incorporating these attributes into one’s own life.

'bearing iniquity,' which means that God holds back the destructive force created by the sin, [and as a result] holds back the punishment that would have been brought about through it.⁸

To further illustrate his point, Rav Kotler brings a reference from the earliest chapters of Torah, as well as *Midrash Genesis Rabbah* to advance his teaching:

This is what Cain said: “My sin is too great to bear.”⁹ Our Sages explain:¹⁰ “So it is — [Cain said,] ‘You bear, sustain, and provide for the entire world, yet my sin is so heavy that You cannot bear it.’ For bearing sin is more difficult than all else.” The very fact that sin must be ‘borne’ already constitutes a tremendous claim against the sinner. But the punishment that eventually follows is the direct consequence of the existence of the sin itself.

[If we apply this to the] the destruction of the Temple: If Israel acts as [other] nations do, this is not in the category of mere *indirect causation (grama.)* Rather, it is an actual deed. For no nation has any power to destroy the Temple; rather, it is the spiritual force created through the sinful deeds [of Israel] that brings about its destruction.

This is like the shooting of an arrow: its force is real, and though it may take time in its trajectory, nevertheless its impact is the actual direct result of the act that set it in motion. So too, the sin — its force and essence, are what truly bring about the destruction.¹¹

This space does not permit full exposition of Rav Kotler’s teaching. He is urging us to attempt to see the possible outcomes and consequences of our acts.

Let us not miss that the name of our portion is *Re’eh* — “see.” Of course, we live in our existential moment. However, even as we make our choices in each moment, we should not ignore what we have learned from past experience (*hitlamdut!*) Nor should we fail to think forward to how our words and deeds will not only impact us, but also others. I believe that in his reading of our portion, Rav Kotler is urging us to further “see” how our words and deeds may impact others — our family, our community, our people, and our world.

As we enter our month of *Elul* — our time for *heshbon hanefesh* — spiritual accounting of our souls — and *teshuvah*/repentance this lesson has a powerful message. The holy soul work of *Elul* and our Holy Days can help us review the year gone by, our relationships — including with our

⁸ *Chochmat HaMatzpun, Devarim 1, page 448.*

⁹ Genesis 4:13.

¹⁰ *Midrash Bereshit Rabbah 22:11*

¹¹ *Chochmat HaMatzpun, Devarim 1, page 448.*

people – and work towards setting our goals of life and our *Mussar* work for the year to come – may it be one filled with sweet blessings, healing, strength and *shalom*!

FOR FOCUS:

- If you could step out of yourself, what would you “see” that raises soul work for you in the month of *Elul*?
- As you face a *bechirah*/choice, how can the perspective of looking back and thinking forward impact you?
- Which *middot* can assist you in making that *bechirah*?

And speaking of *Elul*, here is one last chance to join this year’s program – you can review this year's program and register [HERE!](#) *Shabbat shalom* and *Chodesh tov*!