

About this week's sidra and essay:

Re'ei elaborates some of the mitzvot that will be inaugurated in the Land of Israel: bringing offerings in the Temple as opposed to the Mishkan; obliterating places that once served for idolatrous worship; the seventh "Shemittah" year; agricultural tithes; destroying a city that has been converted to idolatry. Other mitzvot that are less clearly associated with the land are reviewed here as well, but from the new perspective of living in Israel: the holidays (stressing here the aliyah l' regel—coming to the Beit Mikdash); kashrut (with a stress on the eating of animals outside of the Beit Mikdash); charitable loans (concerning the possible effects of an approaching Sabbatical year).

What is disconcerting, however, is the opening of Re'ei: "Look!" ("re'ei") Today I present before you blessing and curse. . . (11:26). The Torah announces the blessings and curses to follow, "today"—but they do not! Somewhat anticlimactically, it turns out that these blessings and curses are meant to be pronounced only once we actually enter the land, but at this point we remain in the dark – even regarding what they consist of. Why would the Torah have wanted to emphasize here something that had no bearing on the moment, something that seems unrelated to the specific content of the parasha? FrameWorks takes a closer look at the parasha's prelude, and discovers a whole new way of looking at the Land of Israel and at the mitzvot as a whole.

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Our parasha opens dramatically, proclaiming 'Look! Today' is the beginning of a new phase in Yisrael's history, filled with the potential for either triumph or disaster.

"Look! Today I present before you blessing and curse. . . (11:26)"

But the drama subsides quickly enough as we move on to other topics and the blessings and scourges are forgotten, set aside to await the grand entry into the Land of Israel:

When God your Lord brings you to the land which you are about to occupy, you must set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eival. (11:29)

We do not even find out what this "blessing and curse" consist of until much later, in parashat *Ki Tavo* (chapter 27), where Moshe specifies the blessing and curse and explains that they will be pronounced by the various tribes themselves:

When you cross the Jordan, the ones who shall stand on Mount Gerizim for the people's blessing shall be Shim'on, Levi, Yehuda, Yissachar, Yosef and Binyamin.

The ones who shall stand on Mount Eival for the curse shall be Re'uvain, Gad, Asher, Zevulun, Dan and Naftali.

The Levites shall then proclaim the following to every individual in Yisrael in a loud voice. . . (27:12-14)

Then why not wait until Moshe is prepared to give us these details before making a stirring but premature presentation in *Re'ei* that seems to go nowhere? The drama here is puzzling and misleading – what exactly are we to "Look" at? What has changed "Today"?

Even the intent of the announcement here is not clear. What does the Torah mean by saying, "*Set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eival*" – just how does one "set" a blessing or a curse on a mountain? One solution is to force an alternative meaning onto the word "blessing":

"Set the blessing. . ." This should be understood as the Targum translates, "set the blessers," i.e. the ones who will be appointed to pronounce the blessings.

Rashi 11:29¹

This approach seems to violate the meaning of the text and of the context, as Ramban argues:

This cannot be right by the simple meaning, because we have not yet even been told that there were any "blessers"!

Ramban 11:29

The alternate solution offered by Ramban cracks open the theme of the parasha to expose its critical innovation.

Until this point in the Torah, blessings and curses were something of a carrot and a stick: perform the commandments and you will be rewarded with blessings, violate the commandments and you will be punished by curses. It would have made no sense to “set” blessings and curses spatially at all, because they are events that will happen in time, not things that can be set in *place* now.

But here in *Re'ei*, continues Ramban, the blessing and curse do not refer to events at all:

But the correct meaning is this: I set before you a *path* of blessing and a *path* of curse,² “before you,” so that *you* will choose the path you desire. . . and verbalize the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eival. . . .

Ramban 11:29

In other words, the actual language and content of this “blessing and curse” are not what is important here, and therefore are not explained here. Instead, “*Look!*” means to appreciate that for the first time we are being asked not to perform, but to *choose*; to choose between paths that we can see *set* out before us, ranging out in directions as distinctly different as alternative spatial paths. We need to see that choice involves not the off-again on-again vagaries of *willpower*, but the consistent vision of *will*; we need to recognize that choice most fundamentally involves not simple behavior, but *approach* to life, vision emanating from the deepest resources of self and pure will.

The Torah teaches here that life in the Land of Israel demands choice, such that we need to define an approach, with its own dynamics of either blessing or curse. We need to see alternative courses stretching before us metaphorically towards the mountains of the Land of Israel, *paths* as opposed to isolated mitzva or trespass.

Look! Today I present before you blessing and curse. . . .(11:26) –

This is what is referred to in the verse, So says God: *Behold I set before you a path of life and a path of death. . . .(Yirmiahu 21:8)*

Tanhuma, Re'ei 1

Ramban, too, considers *Re'ei* to be a new vision (literally) of a life of choice:

“*Look! Today I present before you,*” implies that choice is given into your hands. . . that everything was turned over to man.

Mishne Torah, Hilchot Teshuva, 5:3

It is *re'ei* itself, then, that is so momentous here, not the blessing and the curse to be expounded only later. The news here is that it is man who will set down the blessing and the curse on the very territory of the Land of Israel – man who will choose, and man who will pronounce.

This territorial focus of choice might explain another anomaly here. Curiously, the opening “*Look! Today I present before you blessing and curse. . . .*” is not followed directly by the command to *set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eival*. Instead, the Torah inserts a break (*setuma*) between the two, and includes the command regarding Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival together with the laws that will apply upon entry into Israel:

Set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eival. . . .These are the laws and statutes that you must carefully keep in the land. . . .

Totally destroy all the sites where the nations whom you are driving out worshipped their gods—on the high mountains and on the hills... You must not do this kind [of worship] to God your Lord.

Only to the site that will be chosen by God. . . . (11:29-12:5³)

So where the path of the Land of Israel is defined by *our* choice, the *Beit Mikdash* is the place defined by *God's* choice, and we are told here to accept its uniqueness as the Chosen Place of a Chosen City of a Chosen Land.

Before the Land of Israel was chosen, all lands were suitable for prophecy, once the Land of Israel was chosen, all other lands were excluded; Before Yerushalayim was chosen, all of the Land of Israel was suitable for offering, but once Yerushalayim was chosen the rest of the land was excluded, as it says, *Be careful not to offer your burnt offerings in any site you might find fit—only at the site that God will choose. . . .(12:13,14);*

Before the *Beit Mikdash* was chosen, all of Yerushalayim was suited for the Shechina, but once the *Beit Mikdash* was chosen, the rest of Yerushalayim was excluded. . . .

Mechilta Bo, Mesechta d'Paskha, 1

Every reference to the territory of “The Site” in our parasha is accompanied by a mention of its *chosenness*—again and again.

*Only to the site that will be **chosen** by God. . . (12:5)*

*The site that God your Lord will **choose** to dedicate to His Name. . . (12:11)*

*Only at the site that will be **chosen** by God. . . (12:14)*

*At the site that will be **chosen** by God. . . (12:18)*

*When you are far from the site that will be **chosen** by God. . . (12:21)*

*Come to the site that God will **choose**. . . (12:26)*

*You shall eat before God at the site that He will **choose**. . . . (14:23)*

*When the site that God will **choose** to dedicate to His name will be distant. . . (14:24)*

*You shall journey to the site that God will **choose**. . . . (14:25)*

*Eat it each year at the place that God will **choose**. . . . (15:20)*

*Only to the place that God will **choose**. . . (16:2)*

*But at the site that God will **choose**. . . (16:6)*

*Be happy. . . at the place that God will **choose**. . . . (16:11)*

*Seven days celebrate to God at the site that He will **choose**. . . (16:15)*

*Three times a year all your males. . . at the site that He will **choose**. . . . (16:16)*

Our relationship to God and to the land will be defined by our relationship to choice and chosenness, and that is the profound insight of *Re'ei*. For as long as the mitzvot or the site of service to God were seen to be defined purely by moral suitability, it would be possible to consider our own personal sensitivity to our own individual moral needs and responsiveness. We could look to the “*high mountains*” for a spiritual high, we could experience other well-traveled roads to closeness with God. But chosenness is another question

entirely— for the *Beit Mikdash* becomes an expression of God’s pure *will*, and the mitzvot are then not moral maxims, but His *desire*.⁴

In *Eretz Yisrael* we will need to relate only through the reality of choice, with no room for what might seem more attractive:

You must not do [there] what we do here [in the desert] today – everyone just doing what appears right in his own eyes. . . but when you cross the Jordan and live in the land. . . then only the site that God will choose as the place dedicated to His name—there is where you must bring all. . . . (12:8-11)

This is why the parasha stresses again and again that we can survive, as we must, error and failure, but we will *not* survive substitutions. The tolerance level for wishful fantasy about that which God has chosen is precisely zero.

Totally destroy all the sites where the nations. . . worshipped their gods – on the high mountains and on the hills. . . . You must not do this kind [of worship] to God your Lord – only to the site that will be chosen by God. . . that is where you shall come. (12:1-5);

Be careful not to offer your burnt offerings in just any site you might find fit – only at the site that God will choose. . . . (12:13,14);

Be careful. . . lest you research. . . “How did these nations worship their own gods so that I can do the same [in my worship of God].”⁵ You must not do that kind [of worship] to God your Lord. . . All that I command you – that is what you should do. . . . (12:30-13:1)

Wipe out that [apostate] city. . . to be a tel forever, never to be rebuilt. . . Keep what is desired in the eyes of God! (13:16-19)

Are you perhaps attracted by religiously stimulating miracles? The prophet who performs *honest-to-goodness* miracles but claims that God wants you to worship another god is to be killed because *he spoke distortion* (13:6) – *God is testing you to see if you really love. . . [Him] with all your heart* (13:4). No, there is no room for substitution or distortion, no matter how attractive the religious feelings – only what is chosen makes the difference in the Land of Israel.

In the land of choice, not only the mitzvot must be lived through will and choice, but even the merely *permissible* must be approached as an act of will.

When you say, "I will eat meat," for you deeply desire to eat meat – eat meat as much as your soul desires (12:20)

– This teaches us that a person should eat meat only out of deep desire.

Hulin, 84a

There can be no casual grazing at life in Israel, there can be only the focused will and desire of body or soul. There is nothing of the *parve* in the Chosen Land, no way to live by default. Failure and even iniquity may be rampant in Israel, but look how difficult it is to attract followers to the ersatz – the only temple is the *Beit haMikdash*, and substitution has only a short life span before being destroyed by cynicism.

It is so crucial to our survival in the land that the Torah is careful here to give us precise directions to one spot in all of Israel:

When God your Lord brings you to the land which you are about to occupy, you must set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Eival – they are just across the Jordan, beyond the Sunset Highway on the way to Gilgal, near the plains of Moreh. . . . (11:29,30)

That spot is special. It is the site where Avraham first arrived in Cana'an, where the relationship with the future Land of Israel began. It is here that he was told, "To your descendants I will give this land" (*Bereishit 12:7*). And here, Avraham glimpsed a day that lay nearly five centuries in the future.

Avram passed into the Land of Cana'an until the site of Shechem, until the plains of Moreh. . . . (Bereishit 12:6)

– He was shown Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival where Yisrael would accept the oath of the Torah.

Rashi, *Bereishit 12:6*⁶

It was to this spot that the entire nation hurried on the very first day that they arrived in the Chosen Land.

In a single day, Yisrael crossed the Jordan and came directly to Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, a distance of over sixty kilometers. . . .

Sotah, 36a

For it was here that a nation was born into a new life, imprinted with a vision of a Land of Choice.

Look! Today I present before you blessing and curse. . . . This means, "Pay attention and see! Your lives will not be average lives, as the other nations, for I present you with either blessing or curse – either the fulfilling excellence of blessing or the defeat of curse. . . ."

They are just across the Jordan. . . . just as soon as you enter the land – to make it absolutely clear that you cannot dwell in Israel in mediocrity, leading an average sort of life – it will be either a real success or a real disaster.

Seforno, 11:26,30

This has always been, and always will be, both the blessing and the curse of our profoundly choice land, *Eretz Yisrael*.



endnotes:

¹ s.v. *Ve'natata*, ד"ה ונתת את הברכה

² Note that this also explains the use of the singular "blessing and curse" as it applies to a path, an approach.

³ This is another example of the non-Jewish organization of the Torah into chapters following the apparent logic of the structure without paying attention to the Torah's own graphic hints about structure. Chapter 12 begins with *These are the laws...* while Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival are included in chapter 11 along with the opening of *Re'ei*.

⁴ This is the meaning of the reversal of the earlier *You shall do the desireable and the good in the eyes of God* (6:19) to the *You shall do the good and the desireable in the eyes of God* here in *Re'ei* (12:28). According to R. Yishma'el in *Sifrei Re'ei*, 79, this implies that God's *desire* defines the mitzvot (see also Malbim). But cf. R. Akiva's approach, quoted here in Rashi 12:28.

⁵ As per Ramban, Ibn Ezra and Seforno

⁶ s.v. *Eilon Moreh*, ד"ה אילון מורה