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Re'eh: On Choice and *The Ethics of Authenticity*

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Parshat Re'eh begins with a compelling charge regarding choice and intentionality in our actions:

> See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing, that you will heed the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today; and the curse, if you will not heed the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the way I command you this day, to follow other gods, which you did not know (Deuteronomy 11:26-28).

Bnei Yisrael are offered two options: choose one path, the path of commandments and *mitzvot*, and your life will be blessed. Choose the other path of abandoning God, and curses will follow. This stark binary serves as a prelude to the ceremony of Mount Gerizim and Mount Eval, where the tribes will be split into two, facing each other on these respective mountains, each one representing either blessing or curse. Bnei Yisrael will be asked to discern for themselves which path they wish to take. They will be asked to consciously make a choice.

The ability to choose might not stick out as particularly extraordinary to the Western reader of the Torah. However, it is certainly notable that *Parshat* Re'eh does not open with God *commanding* Bnei Yisrael to choose, but is instead providing them with the option to do so. This is a radical assertion of human autonomy, especially from a Divine authority.

In the 21st century, we are often overwhelmed with choice: ranging from what we wear to what we eat for breakfast, who we want to be in community with to what job we would like to have.[1] However only a few hundred years ago, this range of options was not only nearly impossible; it was frowned upon. The notion that we can and *should* be able to make our own decisions requires respect for the individual as its own unit outside the familial or communal structure. It also means that the individual is not only an agent, but is also endowed with wisdom to be able to make decisions, outside of the rule of a monarchy or control of a caste system. In this historical context, *Parshat* Re'eh's opening is not only surprising but deeply subversive for its time.

The contemporary moral philosopher Charles Taylor claims that navigating choices is one of the most important moral tasks of the 21st century. In his book *The Ethics of Authenticity*, Taylor writes that what defines the modern person is the ability to choose and to be trusted in that choice. He

[1] I would like to acknowledge the privilege with which I am making this claim. I am, thank God, lucky to have been born into a family and context that have provided me with wide-open opportunities to choose. I recognize that not all are so blessed. But whether or not we are actually the decisors of our own destinies, it is reasonable to assert that it is a value of our society that we ought to be. And that is the premise of this argument.

writes: “Even the sense that the significance of my life comes from its being chosen–the case where authenticity is actually grounded on self determining freedom–depends on the understanding that *independent of my will* there is something noble, courageous, and hence significant in giving shape to my own life” (Taylor 39). For Taylor, there is a value in “self-creation,” in my ability to decide between many paths of action (Taylor 39). This value of agency undergirds Taylor’s understanding of the modern drive toward authenticity. Authenticity in a modern sense is often understood as what is more real, and so choosing our actions is a manifestation of that genuine desire. Authentic choice defines who we are and what we stand for.

Taylor clarifies this value of authenticity by identifying some of its boundaries. He notes that authentic choice can sometimes come with a kind of relativism, where choice itself is valued over and above the thing or path chosen. Taylor is concerned about this approach as it often comes with a kind of pluralism that at first seems positive, but often turns into an inability to truly critique other options or deem them as immoral (Taylor 14). With that concern, Taylor asks: Is it really just about choosing, or also about what *kinds* of choices we make? Does choosing what I have for dinner, for example, carry moral weight? Choice is only valuable, Taylor asserts, when the questions at stake are significant: “Self-choice as an ideal makes sense only because some *issues* are more significant than others” (Taylor 14).

Taylor is here echoing the opening message of *Parshat* Re’eh: that we have the power to choose, and that we must decide which decisions are valuable. The act of choosing is ethically important, but it is really about the *kinds* of decisions we make about how to live a good life that make for authenticity and even moral goodness in the world.

We read *Parshat* Re’eh on the precipice of the month of Elul, a month concerned with self-reflection and return (*teshuvah*). Perhaps Taylor’s perspectives on choice and authenticity can help us appreciate why Maimonides seems to ground his ideas of *teshuvah* in the opening verses from our *parsha*. He writes:

> This principle [of *teshuva*] is a fundamental concept and a pillar [on which rests the totality] of the Torah and *mitzvot* as [Deuteronomy 30:15] states… “Behold, I have set before you today [the blessing and the curse],” implying that the choice is in your hands (Mishneh Torah 5:3).

This act of choosing is not just one value among many, but actually the very foundation of Jewish practice, according to Maimonides. The ability to choose our actions and to improve is what assures authenticity in our choices and what it means to be called to Jewish observance. Sometimes the roteness of ritual makes us forget that being intentional in our actions is also part of the larger framework we are subscribing to. *Parshat* Re’eh’s stark binary–to choose blessing or

curse–reminds us that we always have a choice, and it is our job not only to choose, but to elevate the right kinds of choices if we are to worship God authentically.

Sofia Freudenstein graduated with an Honors Bachelor degree from the University of Toronto. Before university, Sofia competed in the International Chidon HaTanach, and participated in the Drisha High School Program, the Bronfman Youth Fellowship, and the Tikvah High School Program. She spent a gap year at Midreshet Lindenbaum, interned for the organization Ayeka, has been Co-Rosh Beit Midrash at Camp Stone for two summers, and was the Director of Experiential Education at the Drisha High School Program. While in the Core Semikha program, Sofia is also pursuing a masters degree in Jewish Philosophy at the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University, was the Maharat Intern for ASBI in Chicago, and spent the past year learning at Yeshivat Drisha.