

Parsha: Re'eh

“See, I set before you today a blessing and a curse.”

Thus opens our Parshah, the Torah reading of Re'eh (“See”). The blessing, Moses proceeds to explain, shall come about “because you will heed the commandments of the L-rd your G-d that I command you today. And the curse, if you will not heed the commandments of the L-rd your G-d, but turn away from the way I command you this day, to follow other gods that you did not know.”

Upon their entry into the Holy Land, the people of Israel are instructed to proclaim the blessing on Mount Gerizim, and the curse on the nearby Mount Ebal. This pair of mountains, Moses directs, are “on the other side of the Jordan, way beyond in the direction of the sunset, in the land of the Canaanites who dwell in the plain, opposite Gilgal, near the plains of Moreh.”

Get Rid of the Idols, Build a Home for G-d

Upon their entry into the Land, the Israelites are instructed to “utterly destroy from all the places where the nations that you shall possess worshipped their gods, upon the lofty mountains and upon the hills, and under every lush tree.”

You shall tear down their altars, smash their monuments, burn their asherim (idolatrous trees) with fire, cut down the graven images of their gods, and destroy their name from that place.

You shall not do so to the L-rd, your G-d.

But only to the place which the L-rd your G-d shall choose from all your tribes, to set His Name there; you shall inquire after His dwelling and come there.

There you shall bring your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the separation by your hand, your vows and your donations, and the firstborn of your cattle and of your sheep.

There you shall eat before G-d, and you shall rejoice in all your endeavors, you and your households, as G-d has blessed you.

“Meat of Desire”

Throughout their 40 years in the desert, the people had been instructed on the various offerings that were brought in the Sanctuary, the meat of which was eaten—under special conditions of sanctity—by the person making the offering, and/or the kohen (priest). Now Moses introduces a new dietary concept—meat eaten as part of an ordinary meal rather than as an extension of the Temple service.

When the L-rd, your G-d, expands your boundary, as He has promised you, and you say, “I will eat meat,” because your soul desires to eat meat, you may eat meat according to every desire of your soul.

If the place G-d chooses to put His Name there will be distant from you, you may slaughter of your cattle and of your sheep, which G-d has given you, as I have commanded you, and you may eat in your cities, according to every desire of your soul.

This meat needn’t be eaten under conditions of ritual purity (taharah), as is the case with the meat of the offerings—rather, “the impure and the pure may eat together.” The only legal restrictions are that the animal be kosher (as specified further on in our Parshah), that it be slaughtered “as I have commanded you” (i.e., in accordance with the laws of shechitah), and

You must be strong not to eat the blood, for the blood is the soul; and you shall not eat the soul with the flesh.

The False Prophet, the Inciter and the Idolatrous City

If there will arise among you a prophet, or a dreamer of a dream, and he gives you a sign or a wonder. And the sign or the wonder of which he spoke to you happens, [and he] says, “Let us go after other gods which you have not known, and let us worship them.” You shall not heed the words of that prophet, or that dreamer of a dream; for the L-rd your G-d is testing you, to know whether you really love the L-rd your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul.

You shall follow the L-rd, your G-d, fear Him, keep His commandments, heed His voice, worship Him and cleave to Him. And that prophet or that dreamer of a dream shall be put to death, because he spoke falsehood about the L-rd your G-d, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, and who redeemed you from the house of bondage, to lead you astray from the way in which the L-rd, your G-d, commanded you to go; so shall you eradicate the evil from your midst.

Nor should any compassion be shown toward the inciter who attempts to lead others to worship idols. And if an entire city falls prey to idolatry, the city should be utterly destroyed.

G-d’s Children

“You are children of the L-rd your G-d,” says Moses to the people. “You shall neither cut yourselves nor make any baldness between your eyes [in mourning] for the dead.

“For you are a holy people to the L-rd your G-d, and G-d has chosen you to be a treasured people for Him, out of all the nations that are upon the earth.”

The Kosher Laws

You shall not eat any abomination.

These are the animals that you may eat: ox, lamb, and kid; gazelle, deer, and antelope, ibex, chamois, bison and giraffe. And every animal that has a split hoof and has a hoof cloven into two hoof sections, [and] chews the cud among the animals, that you may eat.

Both kosher signs are necessary in order for the animal to be permissible for consumption. “The camel, the hyrax and the hare,” which chew the cud but do not have split hooves, are forbidden, as is the swine, which has split hooves but does not chew the cud.

These you may eat of all that are in the waters: all that have fins and scales, you may eat. But whatever does not have fins and scales, you shall not eat; it is unclean for you.

In respect to fowl, the Torah does not give kosher signs, but rather lists twenty-one species of non-kosher birds to be excluded from the Jew’s diet.

Also:

Every flying insect is unclean for you.

You shall not eat any carcass (i.e., an animal not killed in accordance with the special slaughtering procedures and laws of shechitah). You may give it to the stranger who is in your cities, that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner; for you are a holy people to the L-rd your G-d.

You shall not cook a kid in its mother’s milk (i.e., the prohibition against mixing milk with meat).

Tithes and Suspensions

A tenth part of all crops should be taken to the holy city Jerusalem and eaten “before the L-rd your G-d.”

And if the way be too long for you, that you are unable to carry it, for the place which the L-rd your G-d will choose to establish His Name therein is too far from you . . .

Then you shall turn it into money, and bind up the money in your hand, and you shall go to the place the L-rd your G-d will choose.

There the money can be turned back into “whatever your soul desires”—“cattle, sheep, new wine or old wine . . . and you shall eat there before G-d, and you shall rejoice, you and your household”—remembering to invite also the Levite, “for he has neither portion nor inheritance with you.”

Every seventh year is Shemittah, during which all work in fields ceases, and all debts are suspended. Though these laws seem to pose financial hardship to the Jew, G-d promises that

“there will be no needy among you . . . if you hearken to the voice of the L-rd your G-d, to be careful to do all this commandment, which I am commanding you today. . . . You will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.”

Charity

If there will be among you a needy person, from one of your brothers in one of your cities . . . you shall not harden your heart, and you shall not close your hand from your needy brother.

Rather, open, open your hand to him, and you shall lend him sufficient for his needs, which he is lacking . . .

You shall surely give him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him; for because of this thing G-d will bless you in all your work and in all your endeavors.

Our Parshah concludes with the laws requiring the giving of a gift to a freed servant, the offering of firstborn animals to G-d, and the three pilgrimage festivals—Passover, Shavuot and Sukkot.