



## D'var Torah – Parshat Re'eh – Aug. 31, 2024

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Shabbat Shalom.

As we are about to welcome the month of Elul, I'm thinking about all of the things that I want to improve in myself next year. I have a vision of waking up perfectly rested, exercising strenuously, answering every email promptly, checking every item off my To Do list, and having time and energy for passion projects.

But what really happens now is I get up groggily, start scrolling on my phone and before I know it, I'm immersed in the latest news or podcast, failing to notice that my body needs to stretch and my dog and cat are waiting to be fed. Soon, I'm berating myself for how I'm wasting my morning. I'm regretting my past behavior, the chest-beating part of teshuva.

I want to suggest that our parsha's first verse gives us a different model for how to approach teshuva.

The first lesson is that Teshuva can involve focusing on increasing positive behaviors rather than on decreasing negative behaviors.

The second lesson is that Teshuva is easier to do by making changes NOW, in the present, before facing our regrets for past actions.

### First Lesson:

“See, this day I set before you  **blessing** and curse:”

Our first lesson is that we could start our teshuvah by thinking about how to avoid the curses, like not picking up my phone first thing in the morning. But another option is to start with increasing the blessings, such as getting on the elliptical machine instead. Notice that in the verse, the blessings come first.

This is like in positive parenting, in which instead of telling our toddler “no hitting” we tell them to use “gentle hands.” We focus on the positive behavior we want to see, rather than focusing them on the negative behavior we want to extinguish.

We often think of Elul as a time of anxiety and painful regret, because we are taught that Hashem will judge us and mete out punishments if we fail to correct our sins. We fear being stuck repeating our bad habits again next year and suffering the consequences. We know we truly want to improve ourselves, but worry that we will fail to do so.

Nevertheless, our tradition includes a view that Elul is a joyful time and doing Teshuvah ought to be enjoyable rather than punishing. For example, Elul is referred to as an acronym for **אני לדודי ודודי לי** “I am my Beloved's and my Beloved is mine” which is from the love poem of Shir HaShirim. Elul is described as the time when “the King is in the Field,” when

Hashem is our beloved and is right here with us. This is a joyous time, because we have the opportunity to become closer to G-d and to who we are meant to be.

Our behavior is shaped by rewards, which involves dopamine being released in our brain when, for example, we see a colorful sunset photo on Instagram. The dopamine causes us to focus our attention on pleasurable experiences. When Teshuvah is painful, we want to avoid it, to look away from our mistakes. We may feel hopeless, give up on ourselves. But when we focus on positive choices we can make, we feel motivated and energized.

I'm aware that internet companies design their products to stimulate dopamine in our brains, so it captures our attention. Instead of letting myself be manipulated by the tech companies, I can take back my free will to choose what to do with my precious day. I can choose more life-affirming ways to spend my morning, a positive feedback cycle. I make a better choice, which gives me dopamine that makes me feel better, which gives me energy to make even more good choices.

So, our first verse of Re'eh teaches us the first lesson, that we can focus on increasing positive changes rather than on getting rid of negative habits, on choosing the **blessing**.

#### Second LESSON:

Our verse also tells us that we can choose blessings TODAY, Hayom.

"See, **this day** I set before you blessing and curse."

When is HAYOM?

The Sfat Emet says that "hayom", **today**, means EVERY DAY. EVERY day we can choose between blessings and curses. "Every day is a new choice point."

(לפניכם היום. כל יום בחירה חדשה. שפת אמת, ראה תרל"ג)

**(Sfat Emet, Re'eh 1873)**

That is, by focusing on the PRESENT we continually have new chances to improve.

Rambam's Hilchot Teshuva describes the steps of Teshuvah in the opposite order from what many assume: first, we change our actions and thoughts, and then we feel remorse about the past. His proof text for the regret being the last step of Teshuvah is from Jeremiah (31:19):

"Acharei shuvi, nichamti," "after I have completed teshuva, [then] I regret [my previous sins]."

This suggests that it's more effective to not start with the negative focus on the past, but a positive focus on the future.

We can also think about the phrase "**L'fanecha**" here:

"See, this day I set **before you** blessing and curse..."

"Before you" tells us to notice what is right in front of us. The focus on what is right here and now, gives us strength and hope, enough to be able to make small changes. Later, once we feel stronger and more hopeful because of our new positive changes, we have the capacity to look at our past, regret it, and learn from it.

So this is our 2nd lesson: it's easier to first make positive changes NOW, before doing an accounting of our past.

Another aspect of being in the present that is helpful is that it's easier to notice, to SEE ("Re'eh") which is the best choice to make when we are aware of how we are feeling, when we are embodied and mindful.

When I'm scrolling on my phone, I can lose awareness of my body and mind. It's hard to notice what I'm feeling, to be aware of whether I'm acting in accord with my values and goals.

When I am present in my body, I can notice how each choice feels either consistent with my intentions, or like procrastination and avoidance.

Dr. Judson Brewer, a psychiatry professor at Brown University's School of Medicine, studies how to treat addictions using mindfulness training. His training program does not tell people to refrain from their addictive behavior, such as overeating or smoking cigarettes. Instead, he asks them to engage in the addiction while staying mindful of how they actually feel while doing it. While eating a large piece of cake, for example, they may notice that they really enjoy the first 3 bites, and then the cake tastes less and less pleasurable as they continue to eat. By the end, they may find the cake disgusting, even as they continue to eat it. Afterwards, they may notice that they have a stomach ache and feel woozy from the blood sugar spike.

After several times of doing this mindfulness exercise, people tend to no longer crave the cake or other addictive experience. It's not that they beat themselves up or feel ashamed about their behavior. Rather, they simply update their felt experience from automatically associating the cake with pleasure and craving, to noticing that it no longer feels rewarding.

This may be one interpretation of "SEE", Re'eh:

"**See**, this day I set before you blessing and curse..."

When we really notice, experience and **look** at our actions, we will notice that the positive actions are rewarding, they are **blessings**, and that the negative behaviors don't feel good, they are truly **curse**s. Then, we will feel motivated by the positive actions and will no longer even feel drawn to do the "bad" behaviors.

Rabbi Moshe Chayim Luzzato writes in [The Path of the Upright](#) that a goal of spiritual development is to get to the point that we feel drawn to goodness and holiness like a piece of iron is drawn to a magnet.

When we are mindful of how we feel while doing an action, we SEE the immediate consequences for us. In this way, we are motivated to do more of the healthy and less of the unhealthy habits.

So given Dr. Brewer's work and what I've learned about Teshuvah, I am envisioning my new year: I will stay more aware of how I feel while scrolling on my phone and neglecting the tasks that await me. Despite the dopamine hits from scrolling, I will notice that I also feel anxious from taking in too much information, and that I'm feeling guilty about wasting time. Then I'll choose to tackle my To Do list, and I'll notice that it actually feels rewarding to make progress towards my goals. After I make better choices, I will feel empowered and more motivated to continue to improve.

Today, may we notice how we actually feel after each choice, and naturally feel drawn to act in accordance with our highest values.

Shabbat shalom.