

Hannah Rosenfeld tomorrow will be giving some statistics on the vast array and sheer number of mitzvot contained in this week's Torah portion, Re'eh. I'll leave that to her – but there's a teaser for you all.

I'm going to examine a slightly different lens on the portion from what Hannah will explore tomorrow. Re'eh contains an interesting dance this week between the sacred and the profane.

The whole book of Deuteronomy is set on the eve of the Israelites' entry into the land of Israel. The community receives instructions about a multitude of topics that would never have come up in the wilderness: how to manage their land agriculturally, what to do if people begin worshipping the ancient local gods, how a king should rule, and how to observe the festivals in "the place that God will choose," which is to say, the as yet non-existent Temple.

Now some of these instructions are clearly in the category of the sacred, such as the question of idol worshippers and of festival observance. Other topics, such as the caution against allowing despotic kings to amass wealth, or laying out the seven-year planting cycle for the land, are not so obviously sacred rules.

What I love about Parashat Re'eh is how it calls into question our very notions of the sacred and profane. It asserts that the palace, the marketplace, the field are all subject to a mentality of devotion, as much as the synagogue.

For me, a paramount example is the instructions on how to eat meat. I apologize in advance to any vegans present, but if you can hang in with me, I think we can go somewhere meaningful.

In Chapter 12, verses 20-25, we are instructed (and this is a close paraphrase): “When you have the urge to eat meat, you may eat meat wherever you like. If the Temple is too far away, you can slaughter meat, as God has instructed, and eat it where you live. Eat it, however, like game; the ritually pure as well as the impure. Do not partake of the blood, for the blood is the life. You must pour it on the ground.”

Now on the face of it, this commandment seems to say that eating meat is outside of the realm of the holy; because the ritually pure and impure can do it together. However, there are hints that there is more going on here. The first is this phrase, “when you have the urge to eat meat.” The Hebrew for urge is T’a’veh, an uncontrollable desire. Many commentators believe that God is allowing this consumption of meat only as a concession to the bloodthirstiness which God understands to be inherent in human nature. They point to Genesis, in which God originally instructs humanity to only eat vegetables, and then only allows meat-eating after the moral failure that caused Noah’s flood. There, too, we see the prohibition on consuming the blood of any animal.

As Rav Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem eloquently put it: Indeed, a hidden rebuke is to be found within the folds of Scripture regarding the eating of meat. For only after “you say, “I will eat meat,” because your soul longs

to eat meat,” only then, you may eat meat. Behold, you can only inhibit your appetite for meat by an act of moral self-control, and humanity does not yet possess this self-control.” Rav Kook believed that humanity would some day reach a spiritual plane wherein we would revert to the originally intended vegetarian order.

Besides the word, “t’aveh,” another hint is the line: You shall slaughter it, ‘as God has instructed.” Since there is no recorded instruction in Torah regarding how to slaughter meat, commentator Nachmanides interprets this line to mean that God had told Moses, and Moses had relayed to the people all of the minutia of kosher law that was later recorded in the Talmud and Halachic literature.

This reading, anachronistic as it is, charms me. Although the face value of this commandment seems to be that meat eating is not a sacred act, the implications pulled out by our commentators are exactly the opposite. Because eating meat is this concession to human nature that was never supposed to occur, it only works if it is a sacred act, bound up in layers of ritual and commandment that keep the eaters focused on a higher consciousness as they eat.

Now I’m not giving this drash to urge everyone to become vegetarian. Some of you know that my husband and I do occasionally eat meat, though usually it’s when Jacob slaughters it himself. Nor am I saying all this to scold anyone who does not keep kosher. Goodness knows it can be difficult in general, and how much more difficult with the multiplicity of food values that so many of us juggle in this community!

I draw out this example, because I love the pragmatism it indicates in the Divine-human relationship. If we understand the permission to eat meat as a concession to the destructive inclinations of people, and the instructions around how to do so as a way of channelling that inclination, then we have a blueprint for how to deal with other flaws in the human condition and in our characters as well. We work with them. We channel them to serve the sacred.

I think it's no coincidence that this Torah portion falls on Rosh Chodesh Elul. The month of Elul is all about examining our whole lives, including the realms that we usually designate as outside of the sacred. In preparing for the Days of Awe, we don't just ask ourselves, have I engaged in the Jewish community the way I would have liked? , but "Have I treated others the way I would like? Have I been honest in my work? Have I had integrity with my relationship to money? To the Environment? To myself?" We notice those places where we've missed the mark, and we imagine how we can channel our potentially destructive inclinations to a higher purpose.

This is the time of year where we open ourselves to the possibility of life infused with the sacred. We attempt to elevate our behavior in all realms, recognizing, as the Sufi poet Hafiz wrote, "Now is the season to know that everything you do is sacred."

Or at least, that everything you do has the potential to be sacred.

Aleinu is on page 121.