


CHABAD

RESEARCH UNIT

שבת..... *for Friday nights* קדש

Friday 29 August 2008 - 28 Menachem Av 5768
Sedra Re'eh

LIVING IN CONTEXT

TO WHAT EXTENT IS ONE A PRODUCT OF ONE'S ENVIRONMENT? Do we have a choice? In the Sedra¹ Moses warns the Jews who are about to enter the Land of Canaan about the dangers of assimilation. The Canaanites, he tells them, were idolaters. They worshipped statues and Ashera trees. Some of their practices were horrific, such as burning their children².

Further, the Sedra contains a number of laws which help define and strengthen Jewish identity, such as the rules of kashrut³ and of the festivals⁴.

Throughout the Tanach (Bible) there are complaints by the Prophets about the Jews being influenced in a variety of ways by the nations around them. Jewish leaders continued to be concerned about this issue throughout our history. In our own epoch a central challenge concerns reaching out to the large numbers of Jews who have temporarily forgotten their special role in the world.

Yet even if a person remembers that they are Jewish, and perhaps also plays a prominent role in the Jewish community, there are still important questions about one's perception of the world, one's



Dedicated by Mrs Tzipora Sufrin װײַ, to the memory and merit of her father k"z ihætk rgcus hfsrn װ װ װ j "vrv

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direction in life and one's decisions on a day-to-day level. Living as most of us do in a predominantly secular environment, with a generally non-Jewish education and exposed to the ever present power of the media, there are many contrasting forces which are pulling at us, demanding our attention.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that the Sedra gives us some useful general advice, in its laws about kashrut. The simple meaning of these laws concerns what we eat, the idea that a Jew should eat only kosher food. On a broader level, kashrut concerns every aspect of our lives. The word 'kosher' actually means 'suitable', 'fitting'. We can ask about everything we do – is it kosher? Is it fitting, is it appropriate?

The signs of the kosher animals give us a further hint. The Torah tells us that a kosher animal should have split hooves and should be ruminants, chewing the cud⁵. Both these concepts express approaches to life and to decision making. Split hooves suggest not being one-sided and monolithic, being instead able to see different perspectives on the question. Current fashion might dictate A, but the Torah might say B. Being a ruminant suggests exactly that, in broader terms: think it through, literally ruminate, do not be hasty, chew it over and only then come to a decision⁶.

How does one discover what Jewish teaching has to say? Through accessing a combination of books and of people. Jewish ideas and perspectives are expressed by the chain of the Sages, extending from Moses to our own generation. Their teachings, stories and discussions are found in an array of books reaching through the last two thousand years. Today more and more of these are available in translation, and even on the web. And there are Rabbis and Rebbetzins who can help us interpret their ideas and apply them to our practical lives.

These resources help us to look at the different sides of the question, and to think it through carefully. To make the next step into one which helps us live up to the heritage of the Torah, and to be a little closer to making the world a dwelling for the Divine.

1. Deut. 11:26-16:17. 2. See Deut. 12:2-5, 29-31. 3. Deut. 14:3-21. 4. Deut. 16:1-16. 5. Deut. 14:6. 6. See *Likkutei Sichot* vol.2, p.375 ff.

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SEDRA RE'EH

THE WINDS OF ELUL

"There he goes again" Ben snickered as he and David walked out of class. The school bell had just marked the end of the first week of school.

"Teacher's pet!" David muttered.

It was an exciting first week of term and the boys had enjoyed meeting their Sedra teacher for the year, Mr. Benson. They had heard so much about him from the boys in the class above. However, they began to feel a little bothered when their teacher began giving special attention to their new class mate Max Lewis.

"Every single day that new boy gets a private meeting with his highness Mr. Benson" Ben said. "It's as if he were the only boy in the class and we are all just a backdrop to make nice scenery".

"Why doesn't Mr. Benson help me with my school work?" David said. "Why is it that Mr. Benson gives so much help to Max?"

"You know what," Ben suddenly said. "I don't think we should be so harsh".

"Why?" David said "it's not fair!"

“Well” Ben said, “maybe Max isn’t the teacher’s pet, maybe he just needs extra help in his studies. After all, he’s new to our school. That’s just what we heard about Mr Benson, he goes out of his way to help every student catch up to the level of the class. And another thing, next week will be the Hebrew month of Elul”.

“Elul,” David said scratching his head trying to remember. “Ah yes, isn’t that the month before the high holidays like Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur? What’s that got to do with it?”

“Yes,” Ben said, “Elul is a time when we are trying to prepare for Rosh Hashanah. Beginning next Monday, the Shofar will be blown every morning to remind us to improve ourselves. And one way of doing that is by thinking good things about other people. And by caring about other people.”

“You mean,” said David, “that instead of us complaining how much fuss Mr Benson makes of Max Lewis, we should be extra nice to him ourselves.”

“That’s right, and we could even offer to do the Sedra homework with him. He’s only just joined our school, and he might find it difficult. And anyway, it’s good to make friends with him. Hey! There he goes!”

Indeed, Max was just walking near them again, on his way to the bus-stop.

“Max! Max!” called David, in a smiling, welcoming way. Max turned towards them, pleased that they were calling him.

The winds of Elul were blowing, helping everyone have a change of heart.

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