

Leadership in the Wake of Charlottesville
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This week all over the world Jews will read *Parashat Re'eh* from Deuteronomy. It begins, "Look, I set before you this day blessing and curse..."

The most basic concept of Judaism is the free will of every human being. Morality has no value unless every single person has the capacity to decide and act for him- or herself. Each of us has the capacity to choose right from wrong and determine on his or her own whether to act in a way that brings goodness and blessing to our world, or to act in a way that brings evil and curse to our world. Nothing is morally predetermined. Human beings are neither intrinsically good, nor are we intrinsically bad. We are right in the middle. Every action or decision can go either way. The balance only tips in our favor when we repeatedly act for good.

There was a medieval European tradition of rabbinic sages commenting on the Torah verse by verse. There was a rabbi named Ovadiah Sforno who lived in Italy during the Renaissance. His commentary on the opening word of the parashah, *re'eh*, "Look," is so perfect for this week that I couldn't even believe it!

"Look! Pay good attention! So that you will not be like the nations of the world who relate to everything half-heartedly, always trying to find middle ground. Remember that *Anochi noten lifneichem hayom bracha u'k'lalah*, (Deut. 11:26) I present you this day with the choice of two extremes, opposites... You have the choice of both before you; all you have to do is make a choice."

So as we are reminded that the choice lies before each of us, we are commanded to "Pay good attention..." And so we must.

We must **pay good attention** to those leaders who provide moral clarity and those who "relate to everything half-heartedly." We have been fortunate to always have had leader with moral authority at top. Even if we may have disagreed with a particular policy or decision made by a president, there was an undeniable moral gravitas to the role. It is sad to see that is no longer the case. In many ways, we are now witnessing the same thing we saw in school when a substitute teacher walked into the room. Everyone's baser instincts came to fore. The rabble-rousers took control. All this happened because we knew that there was no moral authority in the room. One way to understand what we are seeing today is to expand that image to a nation-wide scale.

The Torah portion, *Parashat Re'eh*, goes on to speak of two mountains in Israel – one on which goodness and blessing dwell, and the other which is the home to evil and curse. Rabbi Rick Jacobs, President of the Union for Reform Judaism, said this week, "We must be able to distinguish between the green lushness of Mt Gerizim and the barren desolation of Mt Ebal."

One would think that it does not require all that much attention to distinguish between the two. For all of us, at least, the distinction is clear. So let us hold our leaders to account, that they too will be able to discern between Gerizim and Ebal, between blessing and curse, between good and evil.

We must also **pay good attention** to what happens in the coming days. Rabbi Jacobs noted on CBS News, “What is on the line is frankly the soul of the United States of America. What is it that we stand for? What are the values that undergird us?” The Jewish doctrine of free will declares that even those who live strictly Jewishly-observant lives do so out of their own free will – they willingly bind themselves to a system that they believe will bring themselves and the world goodness and blessing. Citizens of a nation do the same. We Americans willingly submit not only to the laws but also the social structures that shape our lives. Will we let others determine the values of our society? Will others define the nature of the soul of the United States? No. We will use our free will to shape our nation, our society, for good and for blessing.

And we will **pay good attention** to what is said and what is done to our own Jewish community. If the president will not uphold our values, then we will uphold on our own. One congregant wrote movingly to me this week: “Being the ‘chosen people’ is our most precious and most misunderstood moniker (by Jews and Gentiles alike). We are chosen to shed light on the nations, we are chosen to suffer, and we are chosen to persevere. It is not an exemption from moral rigor or obligation, nor is it G-d's pronouncement of our superiority. On the contrary, we are obliged and obligated to be righteous, and we must continually prove our strength and worth through all the trials chosen for us.”

So yes, let us pay good attention to our distinction as the Chosen People. Let us not minimize or disregard the anti-Semitism now being expressed in the public square. Let us rather stand up for ourselves, as we simultaneously stand up for others like we always have done. And let us use our free will to continually choose to bring goodness, blessing and life to our world.

Ken yehi ratzon, May it be so.