



## Seeing Into the Future

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### Parashat Re'eih 5784

As Parashat Re'eih opens, in the midst of Moshe's longest and most significant farewell address to the Israelites about to cross over into the Land, he begins to speak in the premonitory language of a prophet, signaling to the people two, alternate visions of their future:

#### דברים יא:כו-כח

רֵאֵה אֲנִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיכֶם הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה. אֶת הַבְּרָכָה אֲשֶׁר תִּשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצִוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם. וְהַקְלָלָה אִם לֹא תִשְׁמָעוּ אֶל מִצְוֹת ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְסָרְתֶּם מִן־הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצִוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לֵלֶכֶת אַחֲרֵי אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִדְעֶתֶם.

#### Deuteronomy 11:26-28

**See!**—I place before you today: a blessing and a curse. **The blessing**, if you listen to the commandments of the Eternal your God, which I am commanding you today. **And the curse** if you do not listen to the commandments of the Eternal your God, and turn from the path that I have commanded you today, following after other gods that you do not know.

The *parashah*'s lead word, “*re'eih* - see,” gives extra emphasis to Moshe's charge—alerting his audience to pay careful attention to what comes next—and the definite articles in “**the**



blessing” and “**the** curse” then gesture toward particular outcomes. Yet it is never made entirely clear what these two possible futures entail.<sup>1</sup> What will it look like for this new nation to achieve its blessing, or to endure its curse?

In Nevi'im Rishonim, the narrative books of the Prophets, we find two later stories in Tanakh that each draw from language in the warnings here in Parashat Re'eih in order to suggest potential fulfillments of the blessing and the curse.

The first of these callbacks makes use of a phrase that appears early on in our *parashah*. As Moshe continues to encourage the people to heed the commandments when they enter the Land, he offers them a point of contrast:

דברים יב:ח

לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר אֲנַחֲנוּ עֹשִׂים פֹּה הַיּוֹם אִישׁ כָּל הַיֶּשֶׁר בְּעֵינָיו.

### Deuteronomy 12:8

You shall not do as we do here today, where **every man<sup>2</sup> does what is right in his own eyes**.

Moshe seems to acknowledge that in the chaos of the desert journey, there has been some room for independent, informal decisions about how to live together. But he also insinuates

<sup>1</sup> Rashi explains that “the blessing” and “the curse” refer specifically to the words of blessing and curse that will be pronounced on in the ceremony on Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival, which the Moshe mentions in the next verse, Deuteronomy 11:29, and then returns to articulate more fully towards the end of the Book of Deuteronomy, in Parashat Ki Tavo, chapters 27-28. Even there, however, the descriptions of the state of blessing or curse remain rather vague, e.g., “Blessed you shall be in the city, and blessed you shall be in the field” (28:3).

<sup>2</sup> I could translate this as “everyone,” but I want to retain the use of gendered word *ish* (man), as opposed to *adam* (human), in part because we will be taking note of the literary device of repeating these specific words, but also because the violence that the final usage will refer to is particularly gendered, and suggests that these words have always contained a worry about what happens when men, in particular, begin to take the law into their own hands.



that there have been some shortcomings in this system. Perhaps he means to attribute some of the conflict and violence of the journey to this loose organizational structure.

Once they settle the Land, however, this will have to change. They will have to learn to order their society, establish the rule of law, and keep the forces of mayhem under control. Otherwise, they will all be in danger.

But a sensitive reader of Tanakh may hear also in this verse an ominous forecast of days to come. Because the phrase, “every man does what is right in his eyes,” comes up again, quite prominently, later in the Bible.<sup>3</sup> It appears twice in Book of Judges—first in chapter 17, and then again, identically in chapter 21, as the final line of the book:<sup>4</sup>

בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ הַיָּשָׁר בְּעֵינָיו יַעֲשֶׂה.

In those days, there was no king in Israel, and **every man did what was right in his own eyes.**

What lies between these two callback verses is perhaps the most horrifying scene in the entire Bible.

The Book of Judges describes a chaotic transitional period in Ancient Israel—“after the death of Yehoshua,” but before the people call for “a king in Israel,” in the Book of Samuel. With no clear leadership structure, society begins to unravel. Tribal warfare eventually breaks out, and it is no longer safe to travel into strange territory. In this setting, a man from the territory of Ephraim makes the mistake of wandering into a Benjaminite village, and is quickly surrounded by a band of violent thugs. Every man in this scene does “what is right in his own

<sup>3</sup> The earliest source in which I could find connection is the 12<sup>th</sup> century *midrash*, *Lekah Tov*, by Tuvia ben Eliezer.

<sup>4</sup> And once in Proverbs 21:2: “All a man’s paths seem right in his own eyes.”



eyes”—and they all behave monstrously. An innocent woman is caught in the midst of the conflict and assaulted in the most gruesome and despicable way: raped and mutilated. The horror of the story reaches unthinkable extremes when the woman’s husband finds her dead and—as an expression of his rage and a bizarre form of rebuke—he cuts her into twelve parts and sends one to every tribe in Israel.

The reaction is one of total shock:

#### שופטים יט:ל

וְהָיָה כָּל הָרְאָה וְאָמַר לֹא נִהְיְתָה וְלֹא נִרְאָתָה כְּזֹאת לְמִיּוֹם עָלוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה  
שִׁימוּ לָכֶם עָלֶיהָ עֲצוֹ וְדַבְּרוּ.

#### Judges 19:30

Everyone who **saw**, cried out, “Never has such a thing happened, and never has such a thing **been seen** from the day the Israelites came out from the land of Egypt to this day!

After the earlier reference to Parashat Re’eih, there is an irony in the emphasis this verse places on “seeing”: all of those who “saw” (כל הראה) say emphatically that this has never “been seen” (נתראה). But perhaps if they had heeded our *parashah*’s call to “see” (ראה), they would have been more wary of what can happen when there are no leaders, no laws, and “every man does what is right in his own eyes.” They might have known that a terrible curse was coming.<sup>5</sup>

The Book of Judges makes a point of linking this cursed state of affairs to the lack of a monarch. Both of its callbacks to Parashat Re’eih are introduced by the phrase, “In those days

<sup>5</sup> The description of the curse in Deuteronomy 28:34 is a particularly forms apt warning of the disaster at Givah: “וְהָיִיתָ מְשֻׁעַע מִמֶּרְאָה עֵינֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּרְאֶה” - You will be driven mad by the **sight** your eyes will **see**.”



there was no king in Israel.” The chaos and violence that characterizes the period of the Judges leaves the people devastated, fed up with anarchy, and longing for a king.

It is in the next period of ancient Israel, chronicled in the Book of Samuel, that the people will get their king. Fitting, then, that Samuel will borrow from another set of phrases in Parashat Re’ei to describe the most triumphant moment of Kingship of Israel, in order to suggest that the people achieved some measure of “the blessing” of Re’ei as well.

Let’s first take note of the language from our *parashah*. Immediately after Moshe tells the people not to do whatever is right in their own eyes when they come into the Land, he gives them this charge:

#### דברים יב:יא

וְעָבַרְתֶּם אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן וְיִשְׁבַּתֶּם בְּאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם מִנְחִיל אֶתְכֶם וְהָיִיתָ לָכֶם מִכָּל אֹיְבֵיכֶם מִסָּבִיב וְיִשְׁבַּתֶּם בְּטָח. וְהָיָה הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

#### Deuteronomy 12:10-11

When you cross the Jordan and **settle** in the land that the Eternal your God is allotting to you, and [God] grants you **safety from all your enemies** around you and you live in security. Then you must bring everything that I command you to **the place where the Eternal your God will choose**.

Rashi’s commentary (borrowing from the Sifrei Devarim #67) draws connections from these verses to one that appears just after David has ascended to kingship, defeated the Philistines, and brought back the Ark of the Covenant:



רש"י דברים יב:יא

והיה המקום וגו'. בנו לכם בית הבחירה בירושלים, וכן הוא אומר בדוד "ויהי כי ישב המלך בביתו וה' הניח לו מסביב מכל אויביו ויאמר המלך אל נתן הנביא ראה אנכי יושב בבית ארזים וארון האלקים יושב בתוך היריעה"

### Rashi on Deuteronomy 12:11

“**The Place [where the Eternal your God will choose]**” here in Deuteronomy] means, build yourselves the Temple, the **Chosen** House in Jerusalem. That is why it says, with David, “And so it was, when the king was **settled** in his house, and God had **granted him safety from all his enemies**, that the king said to Natan the Prophet, ‘**See!**—I sit in a house of cedar while the Ark of God sits in a tent!’” (2 Samuel 7:2).

The quote Rashi ends with describes King David’s call to build a Temple for God. Notice that the description of David’s circumstances parallels exactly the language back in our *parashah*, where the notion of establishing a “chosen” place of worship first arises:<sup>6</sup> David was “settled” in his house, and had been “granted safety from his enemies.” These are already striking linguistic echoes.

But there is another word in that quote that makes the connection airtight: “ראה - See!” David starts his vision for building the Temple with the very word that starts our *parashah*. It is as if he has read Parashat Re’ei and is remembering how it goes. He sees suddenly that he is living it, and is perhaps now worthy of its blessing. So he calls out the word—*re’ei*—as if to say, look, see, this is time time for the ultimate blessing! I will be the one to build the Temple.

And yet, though David has all the right references in place, and seems to have read all the right signs, God’s response suggests that David has been a bit too presumptuous. “האִתָּהּ

<sup>6</sup> Rashi must also be noticing that this is the second mention of “the place that [God] will choose” in this chapter and that the phrase appears four more times after this in the chapter.



יְבַנֶּה-לִּי בַּיִת לְשִׁבְתִּי - Are you the one to build a house for Me to dwell in?!” (2 Samuel 7:5), God asks, almost incredulously. It is true, God says, I have made you a king and “given you safety from all your enemies,” but you are not the one I choose for this blessing. Instead, God says that David’s heir to the throne: “הוּא יְבַנֶּה בַּיִת לְשִׁמִּי - he will build a house in My name!” (2 Samuel 7:13).

Even at this moment of ultimate blessing—the greatest King of Israel at the height of his powers, seeking to use those powers to serve God—David is denied his aspirations for the complete fulfillment of prophetic blessings. The Book of Samuel thus retains a note of ambivalence about the blessing of the monarchy. The prophet Shmuel himself, after all, was angry when the people first asked for a king (1 Samuel 8:6), and he warned them (with Deuteronomy callbacks of his own) that a king would “conscript your sons” (8:11) and “seize your daughters” (8:13). Lo and behold, it is only several chapters after David dreams of building the Temple that he uses his power as commander of the army to send a man to the front lines, with the secret agenda of taking the man’s wife after he falls in battle. When David’s son, Shlomo, becomes king, and eventually does build the Temple, he takes these sorts of royal privileges to even greater extremes, forcing thousands into his service, and marrying hundreds of women—and eventually he falls into idol-worship (1 Kings 11). A powerful king can prevent danger, but he can also become a danger of his own.

These two stories, then, leave us with two lessons about how to read prophecy into history. On the one hand, it is wise to listen very carefully to the warnings from our prophetic tradition, especially when they speak of the curses that can befall us when we have no laws or leaders to guide us. When we allow our society to devolve into the savagery and chaos of everyone doing whatever is right in their own eyes, the horrors that follow may exceed all of our expectations.



But on the other hand, we should also be careful not to overread the words of the prophets into history, a temptation we may feel especially during periods of great blessing. We see the fulfillment of long-awaited promises, and we assume that we have correctly identified the will of God at work in the world. The ultimate blessing must be imminent, we think, the time of our redemption is at hand, and it remains only for us to reach out and take a hold of it.

Parashat Re'eih asks us, first and foremost, to “see”—to stay clear-eyed and attentive: neither to be blind to curses that may lie before us, nor to be blinded **by** the blessings that we have already achieved. Such warnings feel especially relevant at a moment in history when many of us are deeply suspicious of our leaders and their agendas, but also scared of the unspeakable violence that human beings are capable of when no one is in control. Moshe’s repeated emphasis on following the path of “the commandments of the Eternal your God” is both an affirmation of the importance of law and order in human society, as well as a reminder that the only leader worthy of our devotion is no earthly king, but the One Who rules above them all.

