

PARSHAS REEH - OF MEN AND MICE

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Of Men and Mice¹

Think of this passage as a Manufacturer's warning label. Institutions crucial to the progress of a Torah nation become dangerous to the spiritual health of individuals and communities when their powers are abused.

The Torah begins with two examples of power gone awry: the false prophet, and the city that is seduced into worshipping false gods. Having established the importance of the navi as a conduit of Divine guidance, the Torah warns of spiritual personalities who misuse their gifts of persuasiveness and charisma, and lead people away from their devotion to Hashem. It then turns to webs of associations with neighbors, friends and family. This binding of people to people that creates thriving Torah communities can also become a seductive or coercive means to pursue false gods and ersatz values.

The Torah then turns to seemingly unrelated issues, which actually flow quite elegantly from the topics that precede them. The Torah revisits a number of areas with which it dealt in Vayikra. The repetition should not bother us at all. Vayikra in general deals with ethical and spiritual norms for a community that houses the mishkan and the Shechinah in its immediate midst. Moshe now speaks to a different generation, which will live out its life in very different circumstances. After a period of conquest and division, they will disperse to different parts of the country, far from the reach of any centralized authority. The Torah cautions here that some of the mitzvos of Vayikra will have new and pressing urgency. A new challenge emerges - remaining focused on the presence of the Divine even when physically removed from it, and when the guidance of a strong leader and role model like Moshe is nothing but a fond memory. Mitzvos that had been important to live on a plane of holiness befitting the Shechinah in their midst, will now become crucial to create that holiness within them.

The first of these is prohibit two forms of bodily mutilation. We are prohibited from cutting the flesh, or creating patches of baldness, both as signs of overwhelming grief over the loss of a loved one. The connection between these and the prohibitions discussed above is clear and direct. Great people, and great numbers of people, have enormous impact upon us. They can mislead, if they choose to, as easily as they can lead. Ordinary people, on the other hand, without any malice or intent, can become the reason for us to falter and stumble. They can become so beloved, so central

to our being, that we cannot imagine life without them. Mutilating the body is a symbolic statement that our existence has become devalued or even worthless with the death of a loved one. Without quite taking our lives, we signify that its breath has been sucked out of it. This futility is improper, and forbidden by law. After the worst of losses, we remain Hashem's children. Our connection with Him should prevent us from being overcome by feelings of complete abandonment and hopelessness. His presence in our lives, his assurance that each of us has purpose so long as we remain alive, belies the suggestion that we have no recourse, and nothing worth the while of continuing on.

While our passage first instructs us not to lose ourselves in grief because we are to remember that we are His children, it develops the argument beyond our feelings as individuals. We are to remember that we are an *am kadosh*, a holy nation, chosen to be special to Him. We dare not abandon our feelings of self-worth, and hence our contributory positions within society. We are not free to walk away from our posts as steadfast contributors to the Torah nation.

The *gemara*[2] sees in *lo sisgodedu* a variation on this theme of maintaining the integrity of a Torah society. It finds a prohibition against dividing the Torah nation into different groups and communities, based on conflicting interpretations of the law. One community should not have two courts, each one ruling differently on any matter, and attracting adherents to its approach. (The word *gedud* refers to a troop of soldiers, abstracted from the main body of the army. This second meaning of *lo sisgodedu* might very well be connected to this idea of a group of Jews split off from their neighbors.) Strange as this sounds today in a community riven by such difference, *Klal Yisrael* succeeded in maintaining a single standard for over twelve hundred years, up until the time of Hillel and Shammai!

The Torah very precisely uses the word *am* here, rather than *goy*. The latter has the connotation of the external face that a people show the rest of the world. It is not, however, this outward-facing projection of unity that the Torah deals with here. *Am* connotes the internal mechanics of many people - even many subgroups - coming together as a large entity. Our *am* belongs in holiness entirely to Hashem. Splitting that nation into separate units disfigures its body as surely as does an individual cutting into his flesh.

The two halachic applications of *lo sisgodedu* are much closely related in yet another way. They can both come from placing people on too high a pedestal. Cutting the flesh in mourning stems from attaching too much importance to the role that individuals play in our lives. Dividing ourselves into factions and subgroups often results from becoming too enamored of the personalities of the leaders of those factions-in-formation. We imagine them to be so important to us that we feel compelled to reject anyone or anything that differs with them.

How are we to avoid the perfectly understandable tendency of over-promotion of people who lead us? The Torah's next topic - its treatment of kosher and non-kosher animals - may well provide the answer.

Once again, we have a topic that was introduced earlier. Here, too, the newer treatment reflects the realities of the moment: a nation about to enter the Land, and fan out across its geography. Vayikra offered a definition of kosher animals (i.e. possessing cloven hooves and a ruminant stomach); Devarim offers a list of names. The Vayikra-definition led to deeper understanding about the nature of the difference between kosher and non-kosher. The people gathered in front of Moshe needed unmistakable clarity about what they could and could not eat. Vayikra's definition provided material to ponder the theoretical meaning of kashrus. This generation needed something more immediate before going in that direction.

Remarkably, one entire subsection of the kosher laws disappears here in Devarim. While animals are explicitly named here, and birds as well, the names of forbidden small animals are not. The Yerushalmi^[3] says that the forbidden rodents are all subsumed by the instruction here that introduces the entire section of kashrus laws: "You shall not eat anything that is disgusting."^[4]

For large parts of humanity, no law is needed to ban eating mice and lizards. They find such animals unpalatable to some internal compass - disgusting, in other words. The Torah therefore does not need to supply the detail about which crawling things to avoid. Bnei Yisrael would avoid them anyway. At the same time, however, the pasuk clearly means to include all forbidden foods. It is telling us to regard perfectly desirable food items in the same manner as we would decline a main course of rat! We are to understand that the Torah forbids things to us because they would detract from our spiritual and ethical growth as Torah Jews. We are to regard any inner imperfection that could distance us from our Father with the same revulsion as the prospect of dining on rodents.

This sense of pride in the value of self takes reflection and personal focus. Prophets, community, and great leaders teach us and help us in many ways. In the end, however, each individual must develop his or her understanding of what it means to be sons and daughters of our Father. As important as our relationships are with others, be they the great people we encounter in our lifetimes, or the ordinary ones we learn to love the most, there is no stepping back from the importance of individual self-worth, confidence and integrity.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Devarim 14:1-3
 2. Yevamos 13B-14A
 3. Yerushalmi Shabbos 9:1
 4. Devarim 14:3
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