

**Parshat Re'eh  
Binaries and Bias**

**Rabba Dr. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz - Advanced Kollel Class of 2021**

---

“See, this day I set before you blessing and curse: blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I enjoin upon you this day; and curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn away from the path that I enjoin upon you this day ...” (Devarim 11: 26-28)

Parshat Re'eh starts with God presenting us with two alternatives: a blessing and a curse – and the warning that our behavior will determine which one we receive. The blessing will be given if we follow God's commandments, but the curse will strike us if we abandon or neglect them. All pretty obvious, we might conclude. But it's not the binary, either-or, take-it-or-leave-it choice it seems at first glance. Rashi, our greatest medieval commentator, notes that the Hebrew words used for the two occurrences of “if” are not the same: the first, which relates to the potential blessing, is “*asher*,” while the second, associated with the potential curse, is the more usual word “*im*.” Using this difference – and probably picking up on the similarity of *asher* to *ashrei* (meaning “happy”) – Rashi interprets this difference as telling us that God's blessings are unconditional. They are given to us before we earn them. However, in contrast, God's curses are conditional – they only apply after we have sinned. God has rigged the system in our favor.

This favorable divine bias towards us appears a second time in the book of Devarim, where Moshe winds up his long speech to *Bnei Yisrael* with a repetition of this choice, in the famous passage in Devarim 30: 19-20, which parallels “blessing” with “life” and “curse” with “death.” Here we are unambiguously instructed on how to make this choice: “Choose life – if you and your offspring would live – by loving the Lord your God,



heeding his commands, and holding fast to Him.” The motif of this life-and-death choice, with its divine bias and clear instructions about which option to choose carefully built in, thus bookends the central section of Devarim. The Torah is deliberately choosing to emphasize a radically daring assertion: God is not neutral or dispassionate, but is deeply involved with us, and over and over again calls us to make the right choices, for our own benefit.

This theme occurs again in the *haftarah*, a lyrical passage from Isaiah that is the third of the seven *haftarot* of consolation. These follow the sorrow and mourning of Tisha B’av, the anniversary of the destruction of both the first and second Temples, caused by our failure as a people to make the right choice. The prophet calls to us: “Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water, even if you have no money; come, buy food and eat; buy food without money, wine and milk without cost” (Isaiah 55: 1). What is God offering the people here, through the medium of His prophet?

The medieval commentator David Kimchi (1160-1235, also known as Radak) notes that all the good things mentioned in this verse are metaphors for Torah: just as life is impossible without water, so it is impossible without Torah; just as wine makes people happy, so does the Torah; and just as milk nourishes children and makes them grow, so the Torah nourishes us and encourages our inner growth and flourishing. Isaiah tells us that God is a generous, even a reckless, giver, endlessly offering us the best He has to give, in spite of a long line of disappointments when we reject His gifts or misuse them. Surely it is no accident that after commemorating our failures on Tisha B’Av, the rabbis felt we needed to be reminded that God endlessly calls us to accept His generosity.

This year, we will be reading *parshat Re’eh* on *Rosh Chodesh Elul*, the beginning of the run-up to the High Holidays with their central focus on *teshuvah*, on returning to God. We often, quite naturally, think about *teshuvah* from our end of the process – reflecting



on our sins and shortcomings, resolving to change our ways, fasting, and praying. Perhaps our path to *teshuvah* would be smoothed and facilitated if we also spent time focusing on the loving generosity, the *chesed*, and the endless patience of God that reach out towards us, as revealed in both the *parshah* and in the *haftarah*. In Isaiah's words (55: 2-3), we can hear God's yearning and love for us: "Give heed to Me, and you shall eat choice food and enjoy the richest viands; incline your ear and come to Me; hearken and you shall be revived."



Rabba Dr. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz studied at Cambridge University, the Hebrew University, and University College London, and has recently published *Challenge and Conformity: The Religious Lives of Orthodox Jewish Women* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2021). Rabba Dr. Lindsey Taylor-Guthartz is a Teaching Fellow at the London School of Jewish Studies, an editor of books for the Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, a frequent speaker at Limmud, and has lectured at the universities of Cambridge, Oxford, King's College London, and Vassar College, NY. Active in interfaith, she has led Scriptural Reasoning groups and completed the Senior Faith in Leadership Programme. Rabba Dr. Taylor-Guthartz also helped to found the Hendon Partnership Minyan and teaches Iyening to women.