

## Parashah One Hundred Thirty-Five

Deuteronomy 11:26–12:19; Isaiah 54:11–55:6; 1Timothy 6:13–16

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notes by Tim Hegg

### *The Unique Worship of HaShem*

In the one-year cycle of Torah readings, our *parashah* is called “Re’eh,” from the opening word רָאָה, “to see,” and in this case an imperative (command): “See!” The word in our context obviously means “pay attention,” or “consider carefully.” But it may also hint at the need to “choose” or “decide,” which the word רָאָה may also bear. For instance, in Gen 22:8 Abraham tells Isaac “God will provide (הֲרָאָה) for Himself a lamb” and in 1Sam 16:1, God tells Samuel to go to Jesse the Bethlehemite because “I have chosen (הֲרָאָה) from his sons a king for Myself.” Even in our own *parashah* the verb is used in this way (12:13), “Be careful that you do not offer your burnt offerings in every cultic place you choose” (“see,” רָאָה). Thus, the opening imperative of our *parashah* may carry not only the meaning of “pay close attention,” but also a command to choose what is right over against that which is evil or wrong. Israel is reminded that as they enter the Land, they will be confronted with the ways of the pagan nations that dwell there, and that they must therefore constantly be on the alert to live in accordance with God’s commandments and not be influenced by the idolatrous ideas and ways of the nations. Thus, they must habitually choose what is right and shun that which is evil.

The same reality confronts us on a daily basis. We are daily confronted with the choice to see things from God’s perspective, or to accept the world’s viewpoint. In our pluralistic society, boundaries are being eroded and the lines between holy and profane are being blurred. It is no longer politically correct to declare some things to be evil and other things holy—to say that this is wrong and that is right. “Acceptance” has become the *summum bonum* (greatest good) in our society, and thus we are encouraged to accept a worldview that finds something “good” in everything.

How differently our Torah portion speaks! The perspective of the Almighty is one of clear distinction, marking the difference between true worship and idolatry, between the holy and profane. And this is based upon a most fundamental truth: that there is one God and only one God, and that He is therefore unique. This being the case, it follows that the *worship of HaShem is also unique*. He has revealed the statutes and ordinances by which He is to be worshipped, and therefore the worship He will accept is that which is offered “in spirit and in truth” (John 4:24). Genuine worship, that which God receives, is bound up in a life of obedience to Him and to Him alone. We are to love Him with all our heart, soul, and might, meaning there can be no division of loyalty. The covenant to which He has called us is one of “all or nothing.”

As our text notes, when Israel would enter the Land, they would re-enact the covenant of Sinai by placing the blessing of the covenant upon Mt. Gerizim, and the curse of the covenant upon Mt. Ebal (11:29, cp. 27:11–26), then passing between the two mountains. Just as the covenant with Abraham (Gen 15) and the covenant at Sinai utilized the dramatization of slain sacrificial animals as the means for enacting the covenant, so Israel, upon entering the Land, would pledge their allegiance to the covenant, accepting upon themselves the blessing for obedience and the curse for disobedience. This reminds us that we are not our own, but that we belong to God Who has redeemed us at great cost to Himself (cf. 1Cor 6:19). As His redeemed people, then, we are given the supreme privilege of anticipating His blessing upon us as we obey and serve Him. We are not called to mediocrity but to greatness—to be servants of the Most High God.

The utter distinction between the worship of God and that of idols is emphasized in our *parashah*. Regarding idols and their places of worship in the Land, God commanded Israel: “you shall utterly destroy...you shall tear down...you shall smash...you shall burn...” Nothing of the idolatrous worship was to remain. Note even the command to “obliterate their names [i.e., the names of the false gods] from that place” (וְאַבְדֶתֶם אֶת־שְׁמֵם מִן־הַמְּקוֹם הַהוּא). Every influence was to be wiped away. Thus, destroying any trace of idol worship reinforced to the people that these idols were without reality—they were just the product of demons (cf. 1Cor 10:20). Once again there is no middle-ground, no “gray” area. The worship of God stands as entirely “other” than the worship of idols.

Even the proper place of corporate worship for Israel as she entered the Land is detailed (12:5) as the place where God would choose. We know, of course, that this was to be Jerusalem, the city of David, and the Temple that Solomon would build (cf. 1Ki 9:3). Previously, sacrifices were offered by individuals in their own dwelling places (during the Patriarchal era), and eventually wherever the Tabernacle was erected. But once Israel came into the Land, her “resting place” and the inheritance of the Lord given to them, they were to bring their sacrifices to one place only—to the Temple established by God Himself. Once again, this emphasizes that the worship of Israel’s God was not a matter of one’s personal preference, but was prescribed in every way by God Himself. God does not expect us to find our own modes or manner of worship. He desires that our worship be characterized by obedience to His commandments, not by the changing whims of our creativity.

The stark contrast between the worship of the one true God and that of idolaters is also highlighted in our text by noting that, inevitably, idol worship involves a perversion of human sexuality. The pagan nations had not only male gods but also female goddesses. The inevitable upshot of this was a mixing of fornication into their modes of false worship. Archaeology of ancient Israelite sites has consistently found evidence of idolatrous practices among Israel from the time of the Judges onward, including the worship of the goddess Asherah. And we read in the historical books of the Tanach the repeated notice that most of the Kings of Judah refused to destroy the “high places” as our *parashah* commands. In every case where idolatry was allowed to remain, the people of Israel were snared into its evil practices. We learn a very valuable lesson from this: it is sheer folly to think that we can tolerate forms of idolatry and presume that we will be unaffected by it. Now surely we cannot go about smashing all forms of idolatry as we live in the diaspora. And even in the Land, until such time as Israel returns to a genuine worship of God, idols and idolaters will remain. But we can commit ourselves to reject all forms of idolatry, and to long for the day when Messiah will return and entirely abolish all idolatry (cf. Zech 14:9).

It is interesting that our *parashah* ends by emphasizing the prohibition against ingesting blood (12:16). While slaughtering of animals for food was permitted to be done in any place (and thus not restricted to the place where sacrificial animals were slaughtered, i.e., the Temple), one was to pour the blood out upon the ground, meaning that the blood was not to be eaten but was to be discarded. In most idol worship of the Ancient Near East, the blood of sacrifices was eaten in one manner or another, believing that ingesting the blood transferred the life energy of the sacrificial animal to the worshipper, thus denying that God is the source of life. The prohibition against ingesting blood is therefore far more than merely a dietary restriction. It was given to Israel to remind her that “the life of the flesh is in the blood” (Lev 17:11), and that as such, it held a sacred connection to the Creator, the giver of life. Here we see another obvious difference between the worship of God and idolatry: for God, life is sacred; for idolaters, life is common and can be “used up” as needed. In-

deed, Satan's goal is to deceive mankind regarding life itself. Self-mutilation, inhumane treatment of animals, and even human sacrifice are all the fruit of demonic activity that seeks to rob God of His glory as the Giver of life. This speaks to the matter of abortion and euthanasia. In a time when both have become commonplace, we must recognize that such taking of life is in direct contrast to what God desires, for He is the One Who both gives and takes life. It is clear that the low value put upon life in our world is the work of the evil one.

Yet if all life belongs to God, then all life is precious and sacred. Crime and malice which disregard life and treat it as something to take or leave cannot be tolerated within the community of God's people. In contrast to man-centered societies which have little or no regard for life, those who worship the God of Israel will inevitably do all in their power to enhance and preserve life.

Finally, our text emphasizes the need to rejoice before the Lord (vv. 12, 18). The religion that HaShem has prescribed for His people is not one of fear or agony; of mystery and darkness, but one of light and rejoicing; of joy and gladness. How often mankind tries to turn the darkness of his own heart into the refrains of his religion. Inevitably, the pagan religions incorporate self-mutilation and pain. Indeed, demonic presence is often seen in persuading a person to harm himself or herself. But HaShem intends that we rejoice in Him and before Him. Our worship, while full of deep and solemn reality, is nonetheless one of joy, for we have come to have a friendship with the Creator; we have entered into a covenant with our Saviour; we have come to know ourselves by knowing our Redeemer. This brings lasting joy—a kind of deep-seated rejoicing that does not ebb and flow with the ups and downs of life.