

Parashah One Hundred Thirty-Six
Deuteronomy 12:20-15:6; Isaiah 54:2-8; Colossians 3:5-11

notes by Tim Hegg

“You are the sons of the Lord your God”

Nothing is more pivotal in our walk with the Lord than understanding who we are—our true identity. All too often we forget that we have been adopted into the family of the Almighty and that we are no longer estranged from the Father. When we forget or fail to believe that we have been made sons and daughters, we begin to live and act out of character, as though HaShem is not our Father.

As Israel is about to enter the Land, Moses reminds them of their covenant relationship with HaShem, and how this secures their identity and prescribes the pattern of their lives. This pattern may be generally outlined in two parts: keeping HaShem’s commandments (13:1 [English 12:32], 13:5 [English v. 4], etc.) and guarding oneself from being ensnared by evil (12:30). How does one go about maintaining this twofold perspective (guarding HaShem’s teaching and guarding *against* the evil that always surrounds us)? Embedded within our Torah text today is a verse that contains six commands — six verbs in the imperfect aspect which HaShem graciously gives us to teach us both who we are and, therefore, how we are to live.

“You shall **follow** (הלך, *halach*) Adonai your God and **fear** (ירא, *yara*) Him; and you shall **keep** (שמר, *shamar*) His commandments, **listen** (שמע, *shama*) to His voice, **serve** (עבד, *avad*) Him, and **cling** (דבק, *davaq*) to Him.”

Let us consider, for a moment, what each of these entails:

1) הלך - “to walk.” Literally the text reads “After Adonai your God you shall walk.” What does it mean to “walk after Adonai your God?” One cannot help but remember the words of Yeshua when He said, (Matt. 16:24) “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” Peter also said, (1Pet. 2:21) “For you have been called for this purpose, since Messiah also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps....” Note the Psalmist’s words: (Ps 119:133) “Establish my footsteps in Thy word, And do not let any iniquity have dominion over me.” To walk after HaShem means to live (walk) as He would—to view life from His perspective and to make choices based upon His leading.

2) ירא “Him you shall fear.” “The fear of the Lord” is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge, according to Shlomo in Mishlei (Proverbs), but what does it mean to “fear the Lord”? The word means more than “to show respect,” a minimal definition popular among modern teachers. But the word, while surely conveying the idea of “respect” is attached to the verb ירא, *yara*, cannot be entirely divested of its basic component, namely, that of “being afraid,” of “trembling” and being aware of one’s own vulnerability. While “walking after Him” conveys a picture of friendship and closeness, “fear” reminds us that we must always see Him for His utter majesty, and we may never consider that He is like us. One of the indictments made against Israel

by the Almighty is (Ps 50:21) "...you thought I was just like you."

3) שָׁמַר, "and His commandments you shall keep." שָׁמַר, *shamar*, denotes primarily the activity of "guarding," which, of course, the English "keeping" has in mind. But when we say we "guard His mitzvot," it denotes both a personal and community aspect. For in the same way that one would guard a flock of sheep, and thus prevent danger from entering in on the one hand, and any sheep getting out on the other, likewise the "guarding" of the mitzvot has two aspects: making sure that the mitzvot are done (positive) and that what HaShem has prohibited is not done (negative). "Guarding" means not only that I am diligent in keeping my life according to God's ways, but that I do all in my power to make the keeping of the mitzvot a natural occurrence within the community. Helping others to "guard" or "keep" the mitzvot is, in itself, a great mitzvah. This means, of course, that the study of the Torah (the Bible, God's gracious teaching) must be a constant and happy duty of any community which intends to "guard" the mitzvot. In fact, we cannot understand the mitzvot apart from a diligent investigation of the text of Scripture, for it is in the Scriptures that Hashem has described the mitzvot in detail and from His word He teaches us their meaning and purpose (even if their primary purpose is to test our obedience and love for Him, 13:4[Eng 3]). Our willingness to work hard at knowing God's word will reflect how determined we are to "guard" His mitzvot.

4) שָׁמַע "His voice you shall hear." שָׁמַע בְּקוֹל, *shema' b'kol* is a common idiom translated woodenly "hear the voice," but is the Hebraic manner of expressing obedience. How, then, does the former "guard" (שָׁמַר, *shamar*) differ from this expression? Surely they both convey the sense of "obey," but each emphasizes an aspect or perspective in that obedience. Even as שָׁמַר, *shamar* focuses upon one's preparation and growth in understanding as it pertains to obeying HaShem, so שָׁמַע, *shama'* focuses upon a close and growing relationship or friendship with the Almighty as a necessary part of being His "child." While it is true that the Hebrew phrase is idiomatic ("to hear the voice" = "obey"), it must not be overlooked that this idiom grew out of the experience of friendship—companionship, for one cannot hear the voice of another unless two things exist: a willingness to listen and a position close enough to hear. How often do we allow the drone of the world's "noise" to get in the way of "hearing His voice?" But even worse is when we, in our own rebellion and stubborn selfishness, would rather leave the place of His presence and live "apart," entirely unaware of His voice. One further thing which might be said about the evolution of this Hebrew idiom: listening involves paying attention. The heart of a true child of the Lord is one which eagerly awaits the sound of His voice.

5) עָבַד "Him you shall serve." The verb עָבַד, *'avad* and the corresponding noun עֲבוּדָה, *'avodah*, "service," "work," is the word group often translated and understood as "worship" in the Tanach. Yeshua quotes Deut. 6:13 (אֵת-יְהוָה) in Mt 4:10 when tempted by Satan: "You shall worship (fear) the Lord your God, and serve Him only." Service is the au-

tomatic response of true adoration. Whomever we love, we serve. Yeshua taught: "...he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Lk 7:47). But who is there, who truly knows the salvation of HaShem, who could say he has been forgiven little? How often is the refrain repeated in the Torah (and even in our *parashah* today) that Israel belongs to HaShem because He redeemed her from Egypt? Surely, when our redemption from slavery is remembered, we are highly motivated to serve the One who, with outstretched arm, redeemed us and set us free. Indeed, our redemption was primarily for one purpose: that we might serve HaShem. When we begin to lose sight of this fact, thinking that our redemption was primarily for our benefit, then we begin to find service to HaShem a necessary but unpleasant dimension of life. But if we are constantly overwhelmed by the gracious and self-sacrificing rescue of our own souls from destruction—if we remember the great cost of our salvation—then our service is never enough, our work never repayment. Even when we grow weary in our service to HaShem, we are joyful, for we have come to understand and rejoice in the fact that service to Him is, indeed, our true and supreme purpose.

6) דָּבַק "to Him you shall cling." This verb is the same verb used in Gen 2:24, "For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one flesh." This "love language," speaks of the closest friendship and companionship, and is intensive here by the addition of an energetic nun (נִדְבַקְנָה, *tidbaqun*). This final verb brings the whole picture into focus, describing covenant renewal and faithfulness—of fostering a growing appreciation and loyalty for God, a loyalty which cannot be dissuaded even by the most overt attack of the enemy or by the very subtle infection of idolatry. As is the case between husband and wife, so it is between the believer and his God: growing love does not just happen, it must be carefully nurtured and sought after. The concept of "clinging" (modern Hebrew uses this same verb to mean "to glue") involves a concerted effort—a laying hold and not letting go. In a time when a good deal of "theology" is being taught which emphasizes everything that HaShem has done for us, we need to be reminded that it is our responsibility and privilege to "cling" to HaShem. Surely our *parashah* reminds us that ultimately our success is in His hands, not our own. But like a small child who is easily frightened because she has not yet learned the myth of self-reliance, so we too must "cling" to our Father, for it is in Him and Him alone that we find our true refuge, our only strong tower. "The Name of Adonai is a strong tower, the righteous run into it and are safe." (Prov 18:10; cp. Nahum 1:7)

As noted above, the admonition of Moses to the people as they prepare to enter the Land contains not only positive commandments to pursue HaShem and one's relationship to Him, but also negative commandments with regard to those things that would draw the people away from God, particularly those things connected to idolatry. While slaughtering meat for consumption could take place anywhere in the Land, Moses reiterates the commandment that all offerings to the Lord must be taken to the "place which God chooses," i.e.,

the Temple that would be built in Jerusalem. This in itself would curb idolatrous practices that would encourage offering sacrifices to pagan gods. But even though the people of Israel might not begin by overtly offering sacrifices to pagan gods, they could be ensnared by curiosity into the pagan practice (12:30). The enemy of our souls is very crafty! What may begin as naïve curiosity may end up as entanglement. Moreover, it is clear that God detests the manner in which idolaters pay homage to the demons and He wants nothing of the sort done by those who worship Him (12:31). While idolatry leads inevitably to the destruction of life (“for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods”), God is the source of life. True worship of God is a celebration of life, not that which leads to death.

A second snare into which Israel could fall was that of the false prophet (12:32–13:5, English verse numbers). The words of Moses here are insightful, for they help us understand how a false prophet works. First, he or she gains the respect of the people by performing a sign or a wonder (אֹת אוֹ מוֹפֵת). Then, after gaining the respect of the people as a true prophet, he or she encourages the people of God to engage in idolatry (to follow other gods, 13:2). Since the prophet or dreamer of dreams has apparently proven himself or herself by performing signs or wonders, the people may be inclined to follow. Yet the primary criteria given to us by Moses with regard to judging a prophet or dreamer of dreams is not their ability to perform signs or wonders, but whether their message aligns with the revealed word of God: “...you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice...” (13:4). This is important for us to remember in our day, in which increasing numbers of so-called “prophets” are arising, some even performing signs and wonders. Ultimately, the litmus test of a true prophet is whether his words conform to those of the Scripture. If they do not, they are not to be heeded or followed. Indeed, in ancient Israel a false prophet was to be executed (13:5).

Even more insidious is the situation where a family member or close friend incites their relatives and/or companions to take up idolatrous practices (13:6–18). This situation is dangerous because one would naturally extend compassion to a relative or close friend, and therefore be less inclined to stand against the false message. But the words of Moses are clear: “you shall not yield to him or listen to him; and your eye shall not pity him, nor shall you spare or conceal him” (13:8). True compassion for one’s neighbor can never run contrary to loving God with all of one’s heart, soul, and might. When the two come into conflict, loving God takes priority.

Even more egregious is the case in which a city is known for its idolatry (13:12ff). If such were to occur, the matter was to be investigated, and if found to be true, the entire city was to be wiped out, and all of its possessions burned as a whole burnt offering to God. Here, once again, we see the principle of corporate solidarity at work: the city is treated as a single entity on the presumption that any who were truly righteous would have left a city entirely given over to idolatry.

Chapter 14 deals with various things that may have some attachment to

idolatry. Cutting oneself or shaving (literally “making bald”) the forehead in mourning the dead was the practice of some idol worship in the Ancient world (v. 1). As such, Israel was not to engage in such things. Moreover, since Israel was to be consecrated to God, and thus the whole nation took on a quasi-priestly role, they were not to inflict bodily defects upon themselves. Even as a priest who had a bodily defect was prohibited from his service, so Israel as a whole was to avoid any appearance of defect as the servant of God.

The issue of food, and what is permitted or prohibited, may find a connection to the idolatry in that very often the sacrifices offered to idols became part of a meal enjoyed by the officiating priests and worshippers alike. That unclean animals (such as the pig) were commonly the sacrificial animals of choice in pagan worship may contribute to the placing of these food laws here in the overall scope of Deuteronomy. The food laws are here summarized (cf. Lev 11:20ff; 20:24–26) as what God has determined is the proper diet for His people. Attempts to understand *why* certain animals are classed as unclean while others are considered clean are, as a whole, unsatisfactory. That modern science and medicine may show some correlation to health issues carried by unclean animals, or dietary value of clean over unclean, in the overall scope of things, these arguments seem difficult to sustain. As Tigay writes:

The Torah devotes no attention to the question of why a particular animal or class of animals is pure or impure. The notion that the choice was made for hygienic reasons is groundless. It originated with Jewish writers of the Middle Ages, some of whom were physicians and thought in medical terms, but was rebutted by others who observed that other peoples eat forbidden animals with no harm and that if the laws had a hygienic purpose they would have prohibited poisonous plants as well. (*JPS Torah Commentary*, “Deuteronomy,” p. 137).

The point of the dietary laws is simply that what God declares to be clean or unclean must be reckoned so by those who are His people. Thus the repeated phrase, “they are unclean *for you*” (14:7, 8, 10, 19). Israel shows herself to be holy (set apart to God) by “avoiding what is impure not by human standards, but by divine standards” (Tigay, *Ibid.*, p. 138).

Most important for our study is the fact that those foods labelled as unclean by God are here called “abhorrent” (תועבה), the same word used in regard to homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13), idols (Deut 7:25f), cross-dressing (Deut 22:5), and all manner of idolatrous practices (Deut 18:9ff; 32:16). Thus, here Moses places eating of prohibited foods in the same category of abhorrence as idolatry and immoral behavior, which would defile Israel and the holiness she is to have toward God.

A question often arises regarding the prohibition in 14:8 of touching the carcass of an unclean animal. It is sometimes read as though God prohibits touching an unclean animal, but this is not the meaning of our verse. By carcass (גבלה, *n'veilah*) is meant an animal that dies of itself or is torn by a predator in the field. Thus, touching the carcass of an unclean animal makes one unclean. But the same is true of the carcass of a clean animal, as Lev 11:39

makes clear. The reason that the unclean animal, and the pig, specifically (as representative of all unclean quadrupeds) is specifically mentioned in regard to touching their carcass is because one might presume that since the animal was unclean and therefore unsuitable for food, touching the carcass had no consequences. But such is not the case: any animal that dies of its own or is killed by a predator renders a person unclean if touched. This demonstrates the overarching reality woven throughout the Torah commandments, that God, being the God of life, is entirely separated from death. Thus, any form of death brings about ritual impurity.

Deut 14:21 has also been misunderstood by many:

You shall not eat anything which dies of itself. You may give it to the alien (*ger*) who is in your town, so that he may eat it, or you may sell it to a foreigner (*nochri*), for you are a holy people to Adonai your God. You shall not boil a young goat in its mother's milk.

We may note the parallel in Lev 17:15:

When any person eats an animal which dies or is torn by beasts, whether he is a native or an alien (*ger*), he shall wash his clothes and bathe in water, and remain unclean until evening; then he will become clean.

It would appear at first reading that there is a clear contradiction here. The Leviticus texts applies the ruling to native born as well as alien (גֵר, *ger*) while the Deuteronomy text seems to make a clear distinction between the two as it relates to eating that which has died or found torn in the field. However, we should understand that the term *ger* must be defined by its context, and may carry a number of different meanings depending upon the context. *Ger* may refer to someone who has joined Israel with the intention of worshipping the God of Israel, or it may simply refer to a visitor passing through Israel but without any intention of confessing Israel's God to be the one and only true God. Thus, in the Lev passage we may presume that the "alien" (*ger*) is someone who has taken up residence in Israel and accepted Israel's God as his or her God. As such, they come under the same Torah as the native born. In the Deuteronomy passage, however, *ger* must refer to a foreigner passing through Israel, who remains outside of the circle of Israel's worship. And the fact that the additional clause ("you may sell it to a foreigner") utilizes the word *nochri* (נוכרי) may highlight this fact, for *nochri* often refers to idolaters. Thus, the use of *ger* is further defined in the Deuteronomy text by the term *nochri*. The *ger* spoken of here is a foreigner who has remained outside of the worship of Israel even though he or she may currently reside among the people of Israel. As such, this *ger* (foreigner) is not a covenant member and is therefore not protected by the covenant privileges and responsibilities attendant to the covenant. Covenant membership brings both the security of being guarded by God's gracious commandments as well as the responsibility to live in obedience to the One Who has redeemed those in His covenant.

A further indication that the *ger* to whom one may give or sell an animal that dies of its own or is torn is not a resident within Israel is the added phrase

“You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk.” This is the third time the phrase is found in the Torah (cf. Ex 23:19; 34:26). Numbers of explanations have been offered for the meaning of this phrase (see Comments to *parashah* #61 in the Triennial Cycle) but the fuller explanation of this law and what it prohibits, is shrouded in history. Interestingly, some manuscripts of the Lxx contain an addition to the phrase, both in Ex 23:19 and in our current text. This addition corresponds to a similar reading in the Samaritan Pentateuch at Ex 23:19. Here is the Lxx of Deut 14:21 –

You shall not boil a lamb in its mother’s milk, for whoever does this is as if he would sacrifice a mole: it is a provocation to the God of Jacob.

The Lxx addition, like the text of the Samaritan Pentateuch (at Ex 23:19) clearly describes the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk as connected in some way with sacrifices. This makes sense since all three of the contexts in which the prohibition is found deal with festival activities in which sacrifices would be brought to the Jerusalem Temple. Thus, the humanitarian laws regarding the proper treatment of animals were of particular importance in regard to Temple sacrifices. Though death was an obvious and necessary part of offering a sacrifice, the sanctity of life was still to be maintained. If we take seriously the pre-Masoretic textual traditions associated with this prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother’s milk, then we at least understand that the law pertains directly to offering a sacrifice and is not a general food law. Separation of meat and milk, which became a central rabbinic *halachah* and kosher standard, simply cannot be derived from the biblical text itself.

Verse 22–29 deal with the laws of tithes. We may note several important aspects of these laws. First, it is clear that tithing was required of crops (and products derived from crops) and livestock. There is no mention of tithing money gained by other means of livelihood. Of course, one could argue by analogy that since the vast majority of Israelites were farmers, tithing crops and flocks could be understood as tithing one’s wealth in general. Still, there is no indication, for instance, that a craftsman was required to tithe his earnings. Secondly, the text is clear that one is to tithe the crops that were sown (14:22). This helps inform the issue mentioned by our Master in Matthew 23:23, when He compares the tithing of herbs with the weightier commandment to honor one’s parents. For herbs grow naturally in the Land (without being “sown”) and thus technically are not required to be tithed. Yet the Pharisees, going beyond the letter of the Torah, tithed mint, dill, and cummin regardless. The Master’s point is that if they had been likewise meticulous about the weightier matters of the Torah, they would have been praiseworthy.

The laws of tithing allowed one to sell the tithe for money if one was at too great a distance from the “place where the Lord your God chooses” (i.e., the Temple), and bring the money to Jerusalem in order to buy the necessary means for sacrifices, libations, and so forth. The primary point is that all such tithes belonged to God, and could not be used for any other purpose. It is in this way that one would learn to “fear” God, for in giving back to Him a tithe of that by which He has blessed, one acknowledges that the necessary

sustenance of life is from His hand. Giving back to God is thus a means of constantly confessing that our blessings come from Him.

In addition to the yearly tithe (“year by year,” שָׁנָה שָׁנָה), the tithe every three years was to be gathered for the disadvantaged, i.e., those unable to provide for themselves. This included the *ger* (who could not own land), the orphan (who had no inherited land), and the widow (who likewise did not receive an inheritance). Grouped together with the disadvantaged was the Levite, who had no tribal allotment in the Land. This triennial tithe was the normal tithe of the year, but was not taken to Jerusalem. Rather, it was to remain in the town or village and be distributed to the poor so that all could “come and eat their fill” (v. 29). Presumably the tithe every three years would be distributed daily to those in need. This is how the Mishnah interprets our verse (m.*Peah* 8.5). If this is the case, then we may presume that three percent of the yearly produce and flocks was sufficient to sustain the disadvantaged among the nation’s population.

The mention of the triennial tithe for the poor gives rise to the notice of the *sh'mittah* or sabbatical year. In the seventh year, all produce was considered ownerless, and thus the poor were allowed to eat whatever the Land produced voluntarily, including the fruit of the vine and tree, as well as other crops that may have grown from seeds dropped in the previous harvest, or from volunteer plants. That Israel failed to honor the sabbatical year meant that the possibility existed for the poor to be unsustainable in the seventh year, since the previous triennial tithe was calculated to last only three years, not four.

In the sabbatical year, all debts were cancelled for Israelites (“fellow” and “kinsman” are used as equivalent terms here), which presumably included the *ger* who had joined himself or herself to Israel’s God. The foreigner who remained outside of the worship of Israel’s God (the *nochri*) retained his debts in the sabbatical year. The cancellation of debts ensured that the economic stability remained in the Israelite community. Thus, when God’s commandment regarding the sabbatical year is heeded, the result is “there shall be no needy among you.” If the triennial tithe is gathered for the poor, the corners of the field left for their maintenance, and debts remitted in the sabbatical year, even the disadvantaged would be provided for. It is in obeying God’s commandments that the Israelite society would flourish. This is the picture given in the *haftarah* portion (Is 54:2–8). The regathered Israel is blessed because in her return to the Lord, she abides by His commandments.

The Apostolic portion was chosen on the basis of the equality it teaches for all who are in Messiah. In the same way that an ancient Israelite, by obeying the laws of tithing and of the sabbatical year was willing to sacrifice his own interests for the sake of his fellow Israelite, thus showing equality, so each one in the body of Messiah is to consider others as more important than himself. Ethnic and gender differences remain, but these are not criteria for determining how one treats others. Within the family of God, all are to be received and treated equally, as those who have been adopted into God’s household, and thus hold equal covenant status, which includes the privileges and responsibilities of the covenant as lived out before Him.