

Dear Chavraya,

During the past week, just before returning to school, Tzvia asked me what I was going to speak about on Shabbos. I was rather startled, given that this is not a frequently asked question. Seeing my puzzlement, she further amazed me by saying that she was giving a d'var Torah at the year's first Hillel Shabbos dinner this week. So, we clarified the Torah portion first. It is *Parashat Re'eh*. I welcomed the opportunity to share with her a personal connection that I have come to feel with this portion. The word *re'eh* is the imperative, see, behold! Years ago, I realized that *re'eh* could be an acronym for my name, its letters, *resh, aleph, hey*, coming to stand for the *resh, aleph, hey* of Rabbi Avigdor Hillel. I delight in taking pause, and exclaiming to others to see and behold the world around us.

Tzvia and I looked at the very beginning of the *parsha* and reflected on how fitting it is for the start of a new school year, and for welcoming new students just setting out on their college careers. The portion begins, *Re'eh anochi noteyn lifneychem ha'yom b'racha u'klalah/See! I am setting before you today blessing and curse*. With God's urging that we follow the commandments, the opening verse comes to be seen as setting a choice before us. It is understood that there are many blessings that we cannot choose, however much we desire them, just as later on in the Torah life and death, blessing and curse are set before us and we are urged to choose life. If life means length of days, then that too is surely not in our hands to choose. In regard to both polarities, blessing and curse, life and death, it is taught so poignantly and powerfully that the choice indeed is in our hands. We are able to choose the way of blessing and the way of life. It is about how we choose to live and the values we choose to affirm in the days that we are given.

In all of our days, each day is an opportunity to choose. The S'fas Emes, the Gerer Rebbe, teaches that *hayom/today* in the first verse of *Re'eh* means, "there is in every day a new choice / *she'yesh b'chol yom b'chirah chadasha,*" just as God renews Creation every day. It is a powerful affirmation of our ability to make of each day a work of creation, to see with each sunrise the possibility of renewal. Our choices, whether for good or ill, are part of the cosmic fabric. It is a beautiful message for the start of a new school year; for all that seems overwhelming and unknown, what is most important is in our hands, the opportunity to choose the way of blessing, to be a blessing.

As Tzvia drew together the strands of her own message as an offering to arriving students, so she helped me to find focus as well. The call to choose the way of blessing is certainly not a message limited to the start of a school year or to transitional and significant moments in our lives. It is a call to be heard and heeded *hayom/today*, every day. In a portion that bids us look after ourselves as well as others, to our own sustenance of body and spirit, as well as to the needs of the poor and vulnerable, a call to live humbly and responsibly before God and people is expressed in the words, *you shall do that which is good and upright/hatov v'hayashar in the eyes of God, your God*. Apparently troubled that the verse speaks only of how we are seen in the eyes of God, Rabbi Akiva said that *hatov/that which is good* means *b'eynei ha'shamayim/in the eyes of Heaven*, while *hayashar/that which is upright* refers to *b'eynei adam/in the eyes of people*. I would add, and I am sure with Rabbi Akiva's approval, it is also about how we are seen in our own

eyes. While of particular importance for young people, how we see ourselves, whether we see our own essence and being as good, allows us to walk upright and unfettered on the path of blessing. Choosing the way of blessing, so may we each be a blessing in all that we do, in the eyes of God, of others, and of ourselves.

Shabbat shalom,
Rabbi Victor