

Shabbat Re'eh 5784

Responding to Zachary Kurtz and Arthur Guetta

Zach and Arthur, thank you for bringing our attention to the mitzvot in our portion – the holidays and kashrut, the laws of eating – and for reminding us of the meaning that these traditional Jewish ways of life can have in our lives. There are so many pressures on Jews as a minority people in our modern world to give up on any practice that's countercultural or different from the way that the majority lives. In other words, there is so much pressure to assimilate. It takes real, sustained effort to get to Hebrew school when your friends don't have to go; to show up for High Holy Days when it could just be a day off school or a weekend; to refrain from eating that pepperoni pizza at the party when everyone else is enjoying it. It's hard to live by a different set of rules. But you're reminding us that the Jewish people have a way of life that is beautiful and meaningful, whether it's related to gathering with family for the cycles of the year, or bringing mindful attention to the food we consume.

Our parasha begins by making the connection between mitzvot and blessing. "Re'eh/See, I place before you blessing and curse. The blessing that you listen to the mitzvot of Adonai your God," Moses says to the people. But what does that really mean? While both of you made the case for living by certain mitzvot, you did not make the case that the reason to live by those mitzvot is because G-d will reward or punish us based on our compliance. You made the case that the mitzvot themselves contain blessing.

Let's look a little closer at how that works. From your perspectives, the blessing is self-evident – you enjoy celebrating the holidays, which makes them a blessing in and of themselves. The mitzvot of kashrut make us less cruel. Perhaps that's all there is to it, but is there more?

I've been reading a wonderful book by Rabbi Shai Held called *Judaism is About Love*. In it, Rabbi Held argues that the central idea in Judaism is that human beings are created with G-d's love in order to live up to that love. He cites numerous Rabbinic texts which tell us that we are created in G-d's image as an act of love, and that not only are we created in G-d's image but we are told that we are created in G-d's image so that we will know that we are loved. You can

see this idea in the prayer we say just before the Shema both mornings and evenings.

This love that we're granted from birth, simply because we exist, not because we did anything to earn it, is meant to give us a strong and solid awareness of our worth. So much of what goes wrong in human behavior is linked to our feeling of insecurity, of uncertainty or fragility in our sense of self-worth. We compare ourselves to others, we feel we need to compete with others and surpass or defeat others to prove our worth. We spend much of our lives seeking accomplishments, wealth, power, and status as we attempt to prove our worth. Meanwhile, we are loved exactly as we are. We are not supposed to be perfect. The love is granted even with all of our imperfections. If we could understand, if we could truly internalize and believe and know that we are inherently worthy, think of how that would change our lives and our world.

So how do we internalize that sense of certainty and security about our worth that would release us from constant striving? Here's where Judaism is brilliant. Judaism tells us that we are meant to live up to the infinite worth we have, we are meant to live up to the infinite love we've been given. And how do we do that? Through mitzvot. Through actions that elevate us. Actions that refine our hunger and need to nourish ourselves. Actions that sanctify the passage of time and seasons. Actions that curb our greed and selfishness. Actions that engage us in compassion and love for other human beings.

That is how mitzvot become a blessing. The actions themselves teach us about our own worth. When we do them, we see ourselves through their light. The actions we take prove our worth to us as they elevate us to a higher ethic. The actions teach us that we are conduits of G-d's love.

The Sefat Emet, writing in the 19th century, said of the first verse of our parasha, "both the soul and the Torah are compared to candles...in everything there is a living point of light from [G-d]. But that inwardness lies hidden in this world. The Jew has to arouse and reveal this inwardness that lies within all things by means of the mitzvot...when you attach yourself [through your actions] to the point [of light] within each thing, you will come to see that it is ... blessing."

Zach and Arthur, thank you for teaching us about the light and the blessing in the mitzvot. As we come to the month of Elul, the month of preparation for our High Holy Days, we each consider how we can better use our actions to bring forth light and blessing in ourselves and in the world. May we know how already loved and already worthy we are. And may we live up to that infinite love that infinite worth through our actions ever more.

Shabbat Shalom.