

Parashat Re'eh 5783, 2023:

*Far More Than Mazal*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon HaKohane, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechezkel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Gittel Malka bat Moshe, Alexander Leib ben Benyamin Yosef, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* begins with the celebrated words:

Behold, I set before you today a blessing and a curse (*re'eh Anochi notane lifnaichem bracha u'klalah*). The blessing, that you will heed the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, which I command you today; and the curse, if you will not heed the commandments of Hashem, your G-d, but turn away from the way I command you this day, to follow other gods, which you did not know. (*Sefer Devarim 11:26-28*, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*)

In his commentary on the Torah, Rabbi Avraham Shmuel Binyamin Sofer *zatzal* (the Katav Sofer, 1815-1871) opines that if we look around us, we will find nations that control other nations, either through out and out force, or by placing them under their sphere of influence. Then, too, there are those nations who are self-governing and free. The Jewish people are different, however, since for most of our storied existence, we have found ourselves at the “mercy” of the general society and, on occasion, we have lived in abject servitude and unimaginable suffering. In stark contrast, the Torah promises us that one day we will rule over the nations of the world and be: “... supreme, above all the nations that He made, [so that you will have] praise, a [distinguished] name and glory...” (26:19). Unfortunately, notes Rav Sofer, there is no middle ground for our people, we are either the “tail or the head of the nations.” (See *Sefer Devarim 28:13 and 44*)

Why is this the case, why do our people, and our people alone, live such an either/or existence?

Rav Sofer suggests the following answer:

The reason is quite simple. The nations of the world live under *mazal* (that is, devoid of Hashem's direction). As such, sometimes this *mazal* forces them to rise to the top, be in the middle or fall to a lowly level. This is not the case with the Jewish people, we do not live under *mazal*, rather the Holy One blessed be He [constantly] guides us. Therefore, if we do His will, then we are *segulah mi'kol ha'amim*—chosen and beloved more than any other nation—for it is for us that the world was created, and we will consequently rule over all other nations. If, however, if we do not perform the will of the Creator, we will go forth as captives in complete misery. (Translation, parentheses and brackets my own)

In Rav Sofer's view, this is precisely why our *pasukim* begin with the word, “*re'eh*—behold, look deeply and see:”

This word, “*re'eh*,” is asking us to think deeply about this matter and note, “*Anochi notane lifnaichem bracha u'klalah*,” which means, either a *bracha* or a *klalah* and there is no middle ground between them. This is because they [our forebears, as well as ourselves] were promised that *bracha* would ensue if they demonstrated loyalty to the Torah, and *klalah* if they failed to do so. For we are not like the rest of the peoples of the world wherein everything depends upon *mazal*, rather, the Holy One blessed be He ever surrounds us with His Divine Providence (*hashgacha pratit*).

The Katav Sofer's penetrating explanation of our *pasukim* is predicated upon Rabbi Yochanan's famous question in *Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 156a*:

Rabbi Yoḥanan said: From where is it derived that *ain mazal l'Yisrael*—there is no [literally] constellation of stars for the Jewish people [and that we live, instead under His *hashgacha pratit*]? As it is stated: “So says Hashem: of the way of the nations you shall not learn, and from the signs of the heaven be not dismayed, for the nations are dismayed from them.” (*Sefer Yirmiyahu 10:2*) [This means,] the nations will be dismayed by them, but not the Jewish people. (Translation, *The Koren Talmud*, Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz *zatzal*, editor with my emendations)

In his commentary on this passage, Rashi (1040-1105) elaborates upon the meaning of, “*ain mazal l'Yisrael*:” “Through *tefilah* and merit, he [that is the Jewish people] can change his *mazal* for the good.” In other words, unlike the nations of the world, we have a dynamic relationship with the Holy One blessed be He that gives us the ability to change the present and future through our

heartfelt entreaties (*tefilah*) and the merit (*zechut*) we accrue through the performance of the *mitzvot*. Moreover, when we add *teshuvah* to *tefilah* and *zechut*, we have the grand triumvirate to which *Chazal* gave powerful voice so long ago: “*u'teshuvah, u'tefilah u'tzdakah ma'avirin roah hagezerah*—and repentance, heartfelt prayer and charitable donations will remove the evil decree from upon us.” May we see the complete fulfillment of this prayer soon, and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)