



Parashat Ki Teitzei – September 10, 2022 – 14 Elul 5782

Dear TBE Family and Friends,

Among the steps that I go through in preparation for our weekly Shabbat services is the “setting” of the Torah scroll/s, finding the place in the unpunctuated Hebrew text where the weekly reading will commence. Locating this starting point can be a bit complex because the same material that appears in the *Eitz Hayim* chumash (the bound, bilingual printing of the first five Books of Moses) as discrete sentences and paragraphs, sometimes appear in the Torah scroll as a solid block of text, conveying the idea that it is all part of the same unbroken narrative.

There are also, occasionally, instances in which the text in the scroll is actually more minutely divided than that in the chumash. This week’s portion (*Parashat Ki Teitzei*) is an example of this. For while the editors at the Jewish Publication Society (JPS), whose translation we rely on, saw a group of precepts concerning the same subject matter (for example, the various means of setting aside a portion of one’s harvest for charity) as falling under the same conceptual umbrella, the Biblical Author treated almost every one of the 74 *mitzvot* (commandments) transmitted in this week’s reading as a free-standing block of text.

The visual impact of this layout is striking. Rather than encountering the *parashah* as a unified entity, one perceives it as a discontinuous series of mandates. What is also striking is how many of these open with the Hebrew word *Lo* (לֹא) (in this context: “Do not ...” or “Thou shalt not ...”).

I wondered to myself, as I was skimming the text, what the effect of this unusual layout has been on Jewish thought and Jewish pedagogy throughout the generations. We are, after all, the “People of the Book” and the “People of the Law”, a culture that defines and often transmits our standards and values in the language of precise statutes.

The act of “aggrieving oneself” (*inui nefesh*) on Yom Kippur, for example gets broken down into a list of prohibited acts (eating, drinking, bathing, wearing perfume or engaging in sexual intercourse). These then get further defined in terms of the volume, frequency or duration of an action (eg, a “sip” of water that is insufficient to fill one’s cheek is not a “drink”). Thus, at the end of the day, a conscientious student of Torah is as likely to find themselves mulling over the question of whether the water remaining in their toothbrush after shaking it out is enough to put them in violation of the mandates of the Yom Kippur fast as they are to ponder whether the sacred day has been spent advancing the goal of re-orienting one’s life towards a more elevated purpose.

Is that really what the “Jewish project” is all about?

Reviewing line after line of “Thou shalt not” prohibitions in anticipation of this week’s Torah reading, I reflected on what it would mean if more of our Torah education, more of our discourse as a Jewish community, was focused not on the specifics of that which is prohibited but rather on the content of what we believe needs to be included to make one’s existence sacred. This is not to say that the mitzvot are irrelevant. They are not. The mitzvot are there to provide signposts, to help chart for us a path that aligns our understanding of desirable conduct with the Divine ideal. In their absence we run the risk of succumbing to “Sheila-ism”, a religion defined by our own whims and preferences.

But perhaps this week as we study *Parashat Ki Teitzei* and this Season of Repentance, as we reflect upon our actions (and inactions) in the year gone by, we can make a purposeful effort to complete the information conveyed by the black ink – the lists of things that we intend to steer away from – with a mental inventory of that encompassed by the (seemingly blank) white spaces: the concrete goals we have for filling our time with purpose and meaning.

Wishing everyone a Shabbat shalom and a meaningful engagement with your Elul goals,

-- Rabbi Rachel Safman