

A Weekly Message of Torah from Rabbi Rheins

There's Got to Be a Better Way

It is clear, said he, that things cannot be otherwise than they are, for since everything is made to serve an end, everything necessarily serves the best end. Observe: noses were made to support spectacles, hence we have spectacles. Legs, as anyone can plainly see, were made to be breeched, and so we have breeches. . . . Consequently, those who say everything is well are uttering mere stupidities; they should say 'everything is for the best!'

Pangloss in Voltaire's Candide (1759)

This week's Torah portion, *Re'eh* (Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17) includes readings that are also read during the Festivals of Pesach, Shavuot and on Shemini Atzeret. Obviously, it contains themes that resonate throughout the year. Indeed, the name, *Re'eh*, is the command form of the verb "to see." What are we commanded to see? We find the answer in the beginning of the *parashah*: "See, this day I set before you blessing and curse" (11:26).

Let's consider this for a moment: blessings and curses are before us. Choices of good and evil, righteousness and wickedness, nobleness and corruption, kindness and cruelty are all before us. Naturally, a decent and caring person would choose goodness, righteousness, nobleness and kindness. But how can we be sure which path, which action will lead to blessings and not curses? "*Re'eh, See,*" look, analyze, consider and consult and the right way will become apparent. Our ancestors took this one step further by metaphorically representing the blessings on Mount Gerizim and the curses on Mount Ebal (Deut. 11:29-30). Gerizim was famously lush, well-watered and green while Ebal was all but barren. The two mountains are adjacent to one another near Shechem (modern Nablus).

Looking even closer, we note that the Torah's inspired wisdom enlightens us to the fact that the blessings and curses are all around us; they are evident and all we have to do is open our eyes and see them.

This teaching may seem at first rather banal: “Just open your eyes and see the blessings.” And yet, it is actually quite radical. Every age (not just this one) is plagued by those who are quick to find the fault, cast the blame, and lament the shame of the day. Their complaints and criticisms are often well founded. In every age there is much to lament. We should never be lulled into a stupor of false optimism ala Voltaire’s Pangloss, that this is “the best of all possible worlds.” Expression of false exuberance ring hollow and are the stuff of mockery. We know that we can do better. We know that we must do better. Still, the antidote to Pangloss is not Chicken Little: no, the sky is not falling.

This past Wednesday evening, Temple Sinai hosted a special JNF (Jewish National Fund) event featuring the Arava Institute for Environmental Studies (AIES). The event was highlighted by presentations from two of AIES graduates, an Israeli and a Jordanian of Palestinian descent. Both of these extraordinary young leaders spoke of their experiences to build a better world. Though they came from quite different backgrounds, they spoke of their mutual commitment to addressing the considerable environmental problems that challenge the world (water shortages, pollution, global warming, etc.) and the fact that these challenges transcend the differences of nation, race, religion, and culture. Their efforts to learn, teach and overcome our global environmental problems are nurtured in Israel, and are led by Israeli Jews and Muslims, as well as by students from Jordan, the West Bank and Gaza.

No, their stories and considerable achievements may not receive much attention in popular newspapers, broadcasts and blogs. But the everyday stories of modern heroes and the blessings from courageous people are all around us; all we have to do is look up and see.

True, this is not (yet) the best of all possible worlds. Our problems and issues are well known. Still, it is heartening to know that good people of all ages are devoting their lives to making this world a better place. They are building bridges

of understanding. They are creating cooperative campaigns to address the pressing problems of global warming, water shortages, pollution, poverty, disease, abuse and human trafficking.

Through Temple Sinai's many social action projects we are participating in these efforts to bring blessings where there are inequalities and injustices. Our Sinai communal support for Jewish Family Service and the Weinberg Food pantry, the Food Bank of the Rockies, the Interfaith Habitat for Humanities, Firefly Autism, Project Angel Food, Special Olympics, Bonfils Blood Center, 9-Health Fair, Sandwiches for the Homeless, and many others, are some of the blessings that are all around us.

Our Temple Sinai members are making a positive difference in this world. Yes, we still have a lot more to do and we can sure use many more people to lend their talents and support. And yet, how wonderful it is to lift up our eyes and look around and see so many blessings!

Speaking of which: I hope that you'll make it a point to join us for the *Erev Shabbat* service this Friday (August 30, 6pm) as our Rabbi Emeritus, Ray Zwerin, speaks on the occasion of Temple Sinai's 52nd birthday. See, blessings are everywhere!

Shabbat Shalom,

Rick

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