



Shabbat Table Talk
Parashat Re'eh - Erev Shabbat 10 August 2018
Torah portion: Deuteronomy 11:26-16:17 Haftarah: Isaiah 54:11-55:5

In Parashat Re'eh, Moses exhorts the Israelites to be obedient as he presents the laws regarding the sanctuary and the rites and festivals celebrated within it. He also instructs them on the laws regarding holiness, idolatry, false prophets, clean and unclean foods, tithes, freeing slaves, among others.

The parashat is part of Moses' second and longest discourse on the laws which constitute the core of Deuteronomy. Also called the Deuteronomistic Code, the laws are in preparation for Israel's entry into the Promised Land and is seen as a kind of survival manual for Israel in their life as a people: how to live and what to avoid.

Moses tells the people that their fate depends on their response to God's commands and promises. Will they choose a great blessing or terrible curse? He says, "I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known." (Deut 11:26-28).

The blessings resulting from obedience are described as abundance of life, prosperity and well-being, a stark contrast from the sufferings and hardships experienced by the Israelites as slaves in Egypt. (Parashat Ki Tavo presents the details on the blessings for obedience in Deut 28:1-17 and the curses for disobedience in Deut 28:15-68).

The parashat ends with the laws of the three festivals. Moses says: "Three times in a year all your males shall appear before the LORD your God in the place which He chooses, at the Feast of Unleavened Bread and at the Feast of Weeks and at the Feast of Booths, and they shall not appear before the LORD empty-handed." (Deut 15:16).

The festivals are to honor and thank the Lord. Each one is to make an offering "as he is able" and according to the blessing given by God. (v. 17). "As he is able" refers to an offering one can afford as the result of the harvest and may be in the form of produce, animals or money. The offering is a freewill contribution – one with no prior obligation or commitment and given as an expression of devotion or gratitude (in contrast to a votive offering where a gift is given for a benefaction such as the birth of a son or safe return from a journey).

When observing the festivals, Moses exhorts them to remember that they were slaves in Egypt (v. 12). The main themes of the festivals are commemoration of the Exodus and gratitude for the harvest. Today, the Feasts of Passover, of Weeks and of Booths are observed by Jews in their homes, synagogues or at the Kotel (Western Wall) in Jerusalem.

In the haftarah from Isaiah the theme is consolation for the exiled Israelites. Isaiah makes the prophecy on how the downtrodden Israelites will once again rise to glory.

Deuteronomy is presented as a covenant structure given by Moses himself. With its hortatory style and tone of life or death urgency, it has been suggested that it is a program for renewing the covenant by the people. Scholars have also said that Deuteronomy was probably composed over the course of three centuries, from the eighth century to the exile and beyond (and therefore not written by Moses himself).

The exact date when it was written and by whom may be subject to study and continuing debate. What is loud and clear is the message: Our one God has blessed us and blessings will continue to flow if we walk in his ways. Another key message: We have to renew our covenant with God again and again.

For Reflection and Discussion: 1) What do you consider to be your big recent blessings? How did you thank God?
 2) What offerings have you made recently to God and the Church? How can we teach others to have a grateful, generous heart?

Bibliography: Etz Hayim: Torah and Commentary (New York, 2001), The Catholic Study Bible, New American Bible Revised Edition (Oxford, New York, 2011).

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