

D'var Torah
Kol Sasson
Parshat Re'eh
August 23, 2014

Shabbat Shalom.

Today is a pretty special day for me. It's my birthday. I'm not going to tell you how old I am but it may help to know that today is also the double chai anniversary of my Bar Mitzvah.

Are you done with the mental math?

It's been suggested that for today's D'var Torah that I just deliver my Bar Mitzvah speech. But, I'll spare you that because the world where I wrote it was a very different place from Kol Sasson. I grew up in a Minneapolis Conservative Synagogues back in the 70s and my speech began "Dear Rabbi, Relatives and Friends" and went downhill from there.

It's been a while since I've had an opportunity to speak here and I've actually been thinking about this parsha for a long time. I thought about tying the Parsha into the situation in Israel. After all, this parsha teaches us the Mitzvot we should observe when entering the Land and talks about the uniqueness of Yerushalayim. But Phyllis spoke so beautifully about the situation in Israel last week that I thought we should continue to linger on her words a little longer.

Oddly, I have the same feeling about Re'eh now that I did back when I was 12, a feeling of being overwhelmed. There is obviously a lot here to talk about: Israel, the word "Re'eh" (what does it mean to see?), Blessing and Curse, Kashrut, Tithing, Idol Worship, False Prophets, Tzedakah and G'machs (an obvious topic for me personally to speak on), and of course The Shalosh Regalim!

What I've settled upon are the pasukim in the beginning of Perek 13: "Be careful to observe everything which I am commanding you. Do not add to it. Do not subtract from it."

The first thing that struck me was the familiarity of this verse. In fact, we just read basically the exact same thing two weeks and 8 perakim ago in Parshat V'etchanan. In

D'varim 4:2 it says "Do not add to the words which I am commanding you, nor take away from it."

The second thing that I found was that even though this is found in Perek 13, Pasuk 1, most commentaries link the pesukim NOT to the rest of Perek 13 that discusses false prophets, but rather to the pesuckim that precede it which discuss the laws of kashrut.

But those aren't what drew me to highlight this commandment. That was two other things:

First, it seems to me that we blatantly ignore this mitzvah all the time! Jews have been adding and subtracting from Torah mitzvot forever. And second, what does this mitzvah teach us about our own Kol Sasson community where we are always looking for new ways to express our spirituality and connection with HaShem?

Rashi's comments really need to be looked at as spanning both V'ethchanan as well as Re'eh. In V'ethchanan he points out that even a child knows that the sages have always added additional mitzvot citing the obvious examples of Purim and Chanukah.

Therefore he concludes that what is referred to here is not adding additional mitzvot but rather adding new items WITHIN an existing Mitzvah.

In Rashi's commentary on Re'eh he then lists some examples of things that we may NOT add- A fifth section in Tefillin, A fifth species in a lulav, a fourth Priestly Blessing. He says that even if the intention of adding is pure, that it is not allowed.

It's Rambam who takes on the more literal interpretation that says we cannot add new mitzvot. He uses these pesukim to draw distinctions through an discussion of the rabbinic practice of building fences around the Torah. Specifically he is talking about extending the "don't cook a calf in its mother's milk" mitzvah to include chickens and similar items. These fences are, of course, very common and are perfectly acceptable.

In the end, this all seems to boil down into a qualitative vs. quantitative issue. Developing a deeper or more intense way of doing a mitzvah is not considered adding to the Torah. So, for example, we can add to the number of shofar blasts that we hear on Rosh HaShanah without concern. Those things which add to the intensity of a mitzvah are allowed. However, if we want to blow the shofar on a different day, or change the nature of the shofar, that is not okay.

So, all of this left me asking how this applies to what we do here at Kol Sasson. Are we really just effecting the qualitative, intensity of the mitzvoth or are we adding and subtracting?

To answer this, I found a nice commentary by Rabbi Avi Weiss. He, and a lot of others, note that we need to keep in mind the distinction between rabbinic legislation and humra (a stringent observance of the law). He notes that “while stringency can elevate spirituality, it is essential to know when a practice falls into the category of humra and when it does not. Failure to make this distinction can often lead to the humra becoming the only accepted practice.” Rabbi Weiss then goes on to note that this can easily lead to what we all see today as an intolerance between those who observe the humra and those who do not. And, who are we kidding, that intolerance often flows in both directions.

It is our responsibility as a community to ensure that our interpretations and practices are qualitative in nature and bring us closer to one another and to Hashem.

So...What can I learn from all of this on my birthday? It seems to me that birthdays are, almost by definition, quantitative in nature. We are always adding, never subtracting. But, it's really not the quantitative that matters most. I don't want to get into a platitude like “you're only as old as you feel” because sometimes, at any age and through no fault of your own, you feel a lot older than you are. Instead, looking back and looking ahead, but mostly just taking stock of where I am right now, it really is the quality of the people around you who matter.

Looking at my family, and our community here at Kol Sasson, these are the things that add intensity to life; my own personal humra. When our Facebook feeds, email inboxes, and the news coming out of Israel, feel as overwhelming as the mitzvoth in Re'eh, we rely upon one another to make sense of it all.

Right now, baruch HaShem, I can say that though my quantity may have just ticked up a notch, so has the quality. And as we all move together through Elul and into the Chaggim, my wish is that you can all say the same.

Shabbat Shalom.