

TIMELESS∞TORAH

Summer Reflections

RE'EH: KEEPING OUR IDENTITY IN AN AGE OF INFLUENCE

In their important 2018 book *How Democracies Die* (Viking Press), Harvard political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt explore a question that once seemed confined to history books: how do societies come to follow dangerous leaders? Drawing on decades of research into the collapse of democracies across Europe and Latin America, they argue that the process rarely begins with a dramatic coup. More often, influential people convince themselves to overlook a leader's obvious flaws because they believe he or she will advance a cause they support. By lending legitimacy, they gradually make the unacceptable appear acceptable. Their conclusions extend far beyond politics. History repeatedly shows how easily people can surrender their own judgment to the force of a compelling personality.

The Torah displays a striking awareness of this danger. Much of Parshat Re'eh is devoted to people who abuse influence. There is the *navi sheker*, the false prophet, whose apparent miracles persuade others to abandon the Torah. There is the *meisat*, who quietly entices friends or relatives into idolatry. There is even the *ir hanidachat*, an entire city swept along by persuasive leaders. The Torah recognises here a timeless fact: people are often led astray by those who know how to capture hearts and minds. The greater a person's gifts, the greater the responsibility that accompanies them. When influence is used honestly, it can elevate an entire generation. When it is misused, however, the consequences can be devastating.

But then comes an unexpected transition. Immediately afterwards the Torah commands: '*You are children of Hashem your God. Do not cut yourselves or make a bald*

patch between your eyes for the dead' (Devarim 14:1). At first glance, the laws of mourning seem to have little to do with false prophets or idolatry. Why interrupt one subject with the other?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (d.1888) explains this with a beautiful insight. The previous chapter, he explains, has been describing people who misuse their spiritual gifts, social standing or even the affection they inspire in others in order to draw people away from Hashem. The laws that follow are therefore not a new subject at all. They continue the same theme from a different angle.

Rav Hirsch writes that the prohibition against self-inflicted wounds in mourning is designed to preserve a person's sense of self-worth - a dignity that comes from belonging directly to Hashem. No human being, however admired or beloved, should ever exercise such a hold over us that we lose our own identity. To harm ourselves because another person is no longer with us is, in Rav Hirsch's words, a form of self-nullification. Healthy grief is natural and necessary. The Torah does not ask us to suppress our emotions. But it does insist that our lives retain their purpose because our ultimate relationship is with Hashem. However much we may love, respect or even revere another person, our deepest identity cannot depend upon them. Before anything else, we are *banim laHashem Elokeichem* - children of Hashem.

That insight echoes one of the most profound observations of the Rambam (d.1204). In the opening chapter of *Hilchot Avodah Zarah*, he explains that idolatry did not begin because people stopped believing in God. On the contrary, they believed in Him completely.



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Their mistake was subtler. They reasoned that since the heavenly bodies served God, they too deserved honour and reverence. What began as admiration gradually became devotion; devotion slowly became worship. The greatest spiritual failures often begin not with rejecting God, but with giving something - or someone - more allegiance than they deserve. The line between respect and dependence can be crossed almost imperceptibly.

Seen in that light, the structure of our parsha becomes very significant. The false prophet, the city led astray and the prohibition against self-harm all address the same underlying danger: allowing another human being to eclipse our independent relationship with Hashem. Whether it is a charismatic religious figure, a political leader, a celebrity or even someone we love deeply, the Torah warns us never to surrender the moral independence that belongs to us alone.

The Sforno (d.1550) adds a further dimension to this. He explains that the opening declaration, '*You are children of Hashem your God*,' is itself the reason to avoid excessive mourning. The bond between parent and child is not broken by death, and our relationship with Hashem endures even through life's deepest losses. Human relationships are among life's greatest blessings, but they are not the foundation of our existence. Our primary identity is never defined by another person, precious though those relationships may be. It is defined by the fact that we belong to Hashem.

This is not a rejection of leadership. Judaism depends upon great leaders, teachers and role models. Moshe Rabbeinu was among the

greatest leaders in history, and the Torah repeatedly commands us to honour parents, teachers and sages. The problem is not admiration; it is abdication. There is a profound difference between learning from someone and allowing them to think on our behalf. The Torah encourages questions, discernment and personal responsibility. Even the greatest leader cannot relieve us of the obligation to exercise our own moral judgement, in accordance with the values of the Torah.

This message has never been more relevant. We live in an age of influencers. Never before have so many people had such an immediate ability to shape how millions think, spend, vote and even believe. Some use that influence wisely; others do not. We naturally seek guidance from people we admire, and there is much to be gained from doing so. But the Torah reminds us that admiration should never become complete dependence. Leadership is a blessing, but only when it inspires our conscience rather than replacing it.

Perhaps that is why these laws appear together. The greatest defence against manipulation is not sharper scepticism but a stronger sense of who we are. As Rav Hirsch reminds us, our self-worth comes from 'belonging directly to God.' Before we belong to any movement, admire any leader or attach ourselves to any personality, we are *banim laHashem Elokeichem* - children of Hashem. It is that relationship which gives us the confidence to learn from others without surrendering ourselves to them.

The weekly Timeless Torah Parsha Shiur resumes in person after the summer break on 26th August