

DRAFT
Drosh for Shabbat Re-eh, 5764

by Yehuda Wiesen
8/13/04

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Speaking Notes

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Introduction

Shabbat Shalom.

Happiness in life is a Jewish goal, but it is **not** our only goal. Our goals as Jews is to live our lives consistent with our tradition. The laws of the Torah are meant to guide, govern and enrich our lives, whether or not that makes us happy for the moment.

Our Torah readings for the past several weeks have stressed mitzvot in both general and specific terms. For example, we read the 10 commandments two weeks ago¹.

Our parsha this week, and the parshiot for the next two weeks, teach us many mitzvot.

Let's talk a little bit about the word mitzva. Sometimes we use the word mitzva to refer to something that is nice to do, even if it is not required. Our many commandments are also referred to as mitzvot. So we have **two** meanings for this one word. This morning we are using the word mitzva to mean commandment.

The Torah we read each week is the primary source for the Jewish laws for living, for halacha. In our tradition, Torah study is considered a religious undertaking and experience. Thru study we draw closer to God. Study is central to our tradition.

So let's study today's parsha. We cannot cover the whole parsha in the hour we have, so let's focus on two things:

- some of the commandments in the parsha, especially those related to kashrut, and
- how mitzvot fit, or play out, in our everyday lives.

¹VaEtchnan, Deut Ch 4 verse 1, "listen to the statutes and ordinances I teach you." Verse 45, "these are the testimonies, statues, and ordinances..." Ten commandments Ch 4 Verses 6-18. Ekev, 2nd paragraph of the Shema, ch 11 verses 13-21.

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Mitzvot in Parsha Reeh

In preparing this drosh, my plan was to read the parsha and focus on the mitzvot in it. Fortunately I could draw on a text, now available in English, called the **Sefer HaHinuch** or the Book of Education, that identifies the laws that come from each parsha in the Torah. It goes thru the parshiot, week by week, and numbers the mitzvot from 1 to 613. The book was written by a father who wanted to give his young son something to do on Shabbat afternoons.

In parsha Reeh there are 17 positive and 38 negative commandments, for a total of 55 mitzvot. This is 5 times as many as in the average parsha. *Sefer HaHinuch* dedicates over 150 pages to Reeh, and another 150 to each of the parshas for the next two weeks. We are reading about many mitzvot in the month or so before Rosh HaShanna.

The 55 mitzvot in our parsha are a diverse collection that cover a wide range, such as:

- 1 Idolatry
- 2 Ritual slaughter, Shechita²
- 3 Kashrut of birds
- 4 Loans
- 5 Charity
- 6 Hametz and Pesach
- 7 Not eating a limb from a living animal³

There are also mitzvot in the parsha that are not included in the 55 because they appear elsewhere in the Torah, such as,

- Do not cook a kid in its mother's milk

Since we cannot cover all these mitzvot this morning, let's look at 5 laws relating to food from our parsha. You probably know these so I'll only briefly mention them:

1. We may eat only animals (mammals) with certain features or signs: animals with split hooves that chew cud.

For example:

- beef - veal - lamb - goat - deer (There are others too)

²Deut 12:21

³ Deut 12:23

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2. We may eat only fish with certain signs: fish with fins and scales.

For example:

- trout - salmon - tuna - anchovies - cod (There are others too)

3. Birds are more complex. They do not have such “signs.” For birds we are guided by tradition and by the named permitted and forbidden birds.

We may eat, for example:

- chicken - domestic duck - domestic doves

4. Permitted animals must be slaughtered ritually or their meat is not kosher to eat.

- Fish are considered slaughtered when taken from water, so there is no ritual slaughter of fish.

5. With respect to milk and meat, we may not eat, or benefit from, meat and milk cooked together.

These and other laws related to foods have resulted in a large kosher food industry, for good reason. Today the secular food preparation industry is complex⁴.

- A. We see a bottle of orange-strawberry juice, or a jar of maraschino cherries, and don't dream that the red color may come from a South American insect, as it often does.
- B. We see maple syrup and may not know that Lard may be used as a defoaming agent during commercial preparation.
- C. We may not know that European chocolate companies are allowed to use up to five percent animal fat to cut the costs of cocoa butter in their product, and still label the product “pure chocolate”.
- D. Some of the “natural flavors” added to foods are not kosher, such as civet, which comes from an Ethiopian cat.

Luckily, in this country there are people who dedicate their lives to helping us eat only what we want to eat. All we need to do is look for the kashrut symbol, or hechsher, on the food package. When we see the little O-U, or Start K, or KHV, we know the food is prepared to a higher standard: it's kosher to eat. I put a handout on the tables at the entrance to the sanctuary with a short list of common hechsher symbols.

Food is important, but there is more to life than eating.

Now let's consider the larger view: the role of mitzvot in our everyday lives.

⁴Based in part on <http://www.kashrut.com/articles/candy/>

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How do Mitzvot Fit in Our Lives?

The laws we find in the Torah and the Talmud give us standards and guidance for virtually all aspects of our lives, for example:

- marriage
- business
- holidays
- charity
- modesty
- birth
- davening
- eating
- death
- basically all aspects of our lives

How do all these Jewish standards fit with our lives as Americans?

The goal of Americans is a happy life, a life of plenty, or so it seems to me. Jews share these goals, but we go further.

Simply put, the goal of Jews is to live our lives as God wants us to. This is our greater goal.

- The mitzvot can guide us as we navigate the tricky and challenging pathways of life.
- The mitzvot have sustained our ancestors as Jews for thousands of years.
- Jews have always emphasized the details of living both for their own sake and as components of and building blocks of the larger aspects of life such as: ethical, compassionate, meaningful existence.

Some Thoughts on Observance

Our goal as Jews may be to live our lives as God wants us to, but it is not easy.

Let me share with you some of my own thoughts on observance.

None of us is fully observant. We are all at some point on our own ladder of observance. Sometimes we climb, sometimes we stand still, sometimes we go down, but always we know which way is up. And if we slip a rung down, it need not be permanent. It is common to go up and down from time to time, as we are stricter or more lenient in our observances.

So what are our options as Conservative Jews concerning observance, recognizing we will always be less than perfectly observant. Here are 5 of my thoughts on observance.

1. First: We may think of observance as a path we walk down each day, in our everyday lives, rather than a goal or destination.
 - Our tradition suggests we do something now, today, even if modest in scope and inconsistent with what we did yesterday and may do this afternoon. Doing something now is preferred to planning to undertake observance on a large scale in the future. That future may never come.

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2. Second: Small steps are a practical approach to increasing observance. For example,
 - say at least one brocha each day
 - make Shabbat a little more of a day of rest, perhaps starting with not cooking
 - do not eat milk and meat together
 - review our own business ethics
 - say the Shema on getting up in the morning
 - do not carry money on Shabbat
 - set aside a few minutes each day for study
 - look for opportunities to do acts of loving-kindness. Even a smile or a few words can make a big difference to someone

3. Third: Planning ahead makes it much easier to observe.
 - For example, If our vacation spans a weekend, we can plan ahead so we know we'll have;
 - - challah and wine on Friday night, and
 - - something consistent with Shabbat to do on Saturday, such as a walk in a nature preserve.

4. Fourth: Observance need not take much time or be inconvenient
 - For example, it takes just a little time to say the Shema in the morning and evening.

5. Fifth: Learning is important. It is hard to obey our laws and follow the guidance of our tradition without knowing what they are. It also takes less time if we know exactly what we are doing, and less inner conflict if we know exactly what we want to do.

And remember, at Emanuel we have wonderful resources to help us: Our Rabbis. Ask them the hard and the practical questions, the small and the large questions, such as:

- A. I have a conference on Shabbos, how can I observe Shabbat and still attend or even present a paper.
- B. I want to say a bracha over my lunch in the cafeteria, but I cannot put on a kippa there. What do I do?
- C. I'll be on an airplane for over 24 hours on hanukka. What do I do about lighting a menorah?
- D. I can't undertake all of keeping kosher just yet, but I want to do something. Where should I start?
- E. I always light candles on fri nite and now I'll be in a hospital on fri nite. What can I do?
- F. What if I am not sure there is a G? What should I observe? Should I observe?

As the first few words of our parsha say so clearly, each day poses existential choices for each of us. Each day our actions or inactions tell us what choices we have made. We can see from our choices what values were operating in our lives today.

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Learning Resources

Before I sum up, let me mention that for those who want to learn more about halacha, there is a short bibliography on the handout with the hechshers on the tables outside the sanctuary.

The book by Rabbi Klein is the authoritative **Conservative** summary of Jewish Law. ((HOLD UP COPY)) It is available in the our (Lifson) library and in the Gift Shop.

In addition, the **RA** has published recent decisions of the Law Committee in book form - These are surprisingly readable.

In Conclusion

Let me sum up by mentioning 5 high points.

- A. We learn many laws from parsha Reeh, including some things about which animals are allowed to us as food.
- B. Happiness is a Jewish goal but not our only goal. Our goal as Jews is to live our lives guided, governed and enriched by the laws of the Torah.
- C. Keeping kosher is one way to recognize our Jewishness.
- D. If we choose to be more observant, we can take small steps in the right direction. No matter where we are on our own ladder of observance, we can always go a small step higher.
- E. Our rabbis are here to help us puzzle through our observance and belief issues and to teach us. That's what a rabbi is for.

Shabbat Shalom.

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Handout

Some Major Kashrut Symbols (Hechshers)



the O-U (the letter U inside a circle)



the Star-K (the letter K inside a small star)



the Chof-K (the letter K inside the Hebrew letter Chof)



the O-K (the letter K inside a small circle)



the KHV (the letters KHV printed in a distinctive combination)

Some Conservative Sources for Learning About Practical Aspects of Jewish Law

Abelson, K. & Fine, D.J., eds (2002) *Responsa 1991-2000: The Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement*. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly.

Golinkin, D. (Ed.) (1997) *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, 1927-1970, volumes 1-3*. (1997) Jerusalem: The Rabbinical Assembly.

*Klein, I. (1992) *A Guide to Jewish Religious Practice* (revised edition). New York: Jewish Theological Seminary. (Available in Emanuel's Lifson Library and the Lang Judaica Shop)

Rabbinical Assembly (1988) *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, 1980-1985*. New York: Author.

Rabbinical Assembly (2001) *Proceedings of the Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, 1986-1990*. New York: Author.

*Wiesen, Y. (2004) *Guide to Practical Halacha and Home Ritual for Conservative Jews* (free download of this is available at: <http://personnelselection.com/halacha.htm>).

* Comprehensive in scope.

Notes for this drosh on Reeh are available at: <http://mahadash.com/docs/wiesen/drosh.reeh.pdf>