

Re'eh – 5782

Last Sunday evening, no doubt, many of you here this morning tuned into the CNN special report hosted by Dana Bash who is, herself, Jewish and the grandchild of Holocaust survivors. You'll forgive me if I can't remember when, exactly, in the hour-long documentary, one of Dana's interviewees talked about how difficult it was for the general public, never mind the Jewish people themselves, to appreciate that we are not just a religion but a culture as well. Our parsha this morning makes it aboundingly clear that we are both by virtue of the items in delineates for us to think about.

The parsha opens with a reminder about where we are in the journey from slavery to freedom, for sure, and several more times in the parsha, we are reminded of how different we are meant to be from Egypt and Egyptian society. But more importantly, it reminds us that what Moshe is transmitting to the Israelite nation is both a blessing and a curse. WE go on to read about the laws of Kashrut. We are reminded that we are not to be like any other society in the geopolitical territory we are about to inhabit. WE are not to be like the Egyptians. We are not to have any false gods and we are to eliminate anyone who believes that they can be both Israelite and pagan at the same time, so there is absolutely no doubt about the religious values being transmitted. But then we are reminded that the society we are about to create is to be marked by equality and, as much as possible, classlessness. We are also forbidden from any form of religious prayer in any other location than the Holy Temple which is to be created once we inhabit the land.

So how is all of this both blessing and curse. In order to understand and to make my point, let's consider the times we live in. I am a baby

boomer. I was conceived immediately after the war came to an end, and technically, that makes me one of the eldest of the baby boomers. It was my generation that fell in love with folk music and made it so central to our youth culture. We were the original protesters against the war in Viet Nam and the military industrial complex in the United States that brought it about. My generation anguished over colonialism and the effect we had on events all over the world. My generation gave birth to the hippies and to Rock and Roll. But we also gave birth to the idea of individualism. Without our strong inclination to make the rights of the individual so paramount, we'd not have the LGBTQ+ movement today nor gay marriage and freedom of expression and so much. Individualism became the ethos we lived our lives by.

Which brings me back to the idea of a blessing and a curse. In order to understand precisely what I mean; all you need to do is to look at the events right in front of us playing out on television and in the media every day. Being free to choose the evil inclination over the moral, the right inclination is for sure a hallmark of our modern times. But even though we are given free will, in order to live in a free society, as free individuals, we have to sometimes bend our free will so that others can enjoy the same rights we do. Therein lies the hard part, the curse part.

WE need one another to advance our goals as a society. In St. Catharines, we all want to have a vital and vibrant synagogue, but not everyone is prepared to pay their fair share of what such a situation requires. We all want meaningful services but not all of us are prepared to spend the time that is required so that those of us who want more, get more. We all want social activities and opportunities for Chavershaft, friendship and social interaction, but we are not all willing to put in the effort to advance the common good. We all want a vibrant and vital congregation, but we don't all

of us think in terms of what needs to be done so that EVERYONE gets something of what they want. And this brings me to the olden mean.

WE live in extremely challenging times. We find reasons to argue over the smallest issues. But we are no different than earlier generations that came before us, long before us. The sages refer to pilpul, arguing and negotiating over what is or what is not acceptable and seldom did the rabbis agree. Our people evolved a huge literature of what is or is not acceptable in any number of situations. I have been reading the arguments of late on the Daf HaShavui posted by United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism when a mikveh is kosher and when it is not, when a bird to eat is kosher or not, when a thief must repay what he has stolen and when he is not obliged to repay. Since I love to use metaphors that come from the movies, it is like the song in Fiddler on the Roof at the beginning where they argue over whether it was a horse or a mule. As Tevye says, sounds crazy, eh? But it is not. It lies at the root of whether something is a blessing or a curse.

To my way of thinking, all this really brings me to the idea that we are so lucky because we are reminded all the time that we need to search for what is fair and just in every situation. WE need to force ourselves to see the world not through our own eyes, our individualistic, eyes but the eyes of the other. It is that other directedness that has contributed to our longevity not just as individuals, but as societies, as communities, as synagogues. Our tradition requires us to take a step back and always see the bigger picture and realize that it is not just for us that things are a blessing and curse, but for others as well and sometimes our blessing is another person's curse. Hopefully by having that view, it makes us a better person, and a better society.