



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Re'eh

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September 3, 2016
Re'eh/Rosh Chodesh Elul

Jews Without Borders



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Should the Land of Israel consider broadening its borders?

What would the United Nations say about that? Would the “Nations” become more “United” if that happened?

And what about us as individual Jews? Should we broaden our personal boundaries? Should we expand our horizons?

There are Doctors without Borders, why not Jews without Borders?

On the subject of expansion of borders, the Talmud says that only those who are expansive should eat meat? Why?

The Midrash says that those who give are considered much broader than those who only take.

What does any of this have to do with *Rosh Chodesh Elul* or, for that matter, the Labor Day weekend?

A fabulous story about Sir Moses Montifore teaches us what it truly means to be wealthy, giving and expansive.

Indeed, that is the calling of Israel – Israel the Land and Israel the People.

This also teaches us much about borders in general, which are all over the news lately – from the Americas to Europe, from the Far East to the Middle East.

JEWS WITHOUT BORDERS

1. Border Crossings (Current Events)

Borders are all over the news lately – from the Americas to Europe, from the Far East to the Middle East, not to mention the borders of Israel which are always in the news.

In the Americas, specifically the border between the United States to the north and Mexico to the south, there is much, oft-contentious discussion with regard to border policies, the wall proposed by Donald Trump, and the US stance on immigration in general.

All that, however, pales in comparison to the discussion now raging throughout Europe with regard to the rivers of refugees rapidly flowing out of Syria (and other Middle Eastern countries) into the European Union. Brexit and Burkini controversies notwithstanding, the entire Europe seems to be rethinking the fabric of nationhood, asking itself: “What are borders for ... how do we maintain our national identity ... what is our responsibility to these homeless people ... how do we prevent importing imported terrorism along with them ... how do we keep our citizens safe?”

And then there is the Middle East and all its issues. Over there, the Arab nations are not asking, “How should we control our borders?” but rather, “What happened to our borders?” Syria seems to have none; part of it is controlled by Assad’s regime, part by ISIS, part by other rebel fighters. Iraq has not been Iraq for some time; part of it is controlled by the Shiite government, part by Sunni ISIS, part by the Kurds. Sudan too has been split for years, as has been Yemen. Libya is a country ruled by a plethora of tribes, gangs, and the like...

In the Middle East there is no cross-border immigration discussion – simply because there no longer are defined borders, period! The doctors over there are doctors without borders literally.

Some blame the British for dividing the region with unnatural borders, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire in the early part of the 20th century.

As usual, the discussion leads back to Israel. While the world is going to hell in a handbasket, while hundreds of thousands of people are murdered, for some reason it continues to be popular to parrot the same ridiculous sound bites about the “Green Line,” and “the West Bank” and to blame the settlements for all the regions problems. It’s as if Israel’s borders would shrink, we’d have world peace.

Well, for this reason I’d like to talk to you about borders – specifically what the Torah says about borders.

The Torah has a very clear answer to the refugee crises and border issues. It is an answer that is very expansive and broadening.

2. Re'eh: Expansion and Meat

This week’s Torah reading is *Parshat Re'eh*, which means “seeing” or “vision.” The Torah has a vision for life, a directive for seeing things in a divine light, and for living in an expansive way, which has to do with expanding borders. This is what the Torah says:

When G-d expands your borders as He promised you, and your natural desire to eat meat asserts itself, so that you say, “I wish to eat meat,” you may eat as much meat as you wish.¹

The expansion-of-borders reference relates to a promise that G-d made to Abraham. G-d said that He would give to Abraham and his offspring the Land of Israel, which will ultimately expand to the great Euphrates River.² But what is the connection between expanding borders and eating meat? Why are both of these mentioned in the same verse?

¹ Deuteronomy 12:20.

² Genesis 15:18-21. This is no simple matter, and the commentaries should be consulted for understanding of the exact parameter of Israel’s biblical borders. Simply put, when the verse mentions that Israel’s borders will reach the Euphrates, this is the limit reached in the days of Solomon (1 Kings 5:1).

3. The Talmud: Meat, Broadly Speaking

The Talmud³ sees an intrinsic connection between expansiveness and meat. It states that there is a lesson to be learned from the fact that our verse begins with expanding borders and concludes with eating meat, but only if one desires it: “The Torah teaches proper conduct that one should not desire to eat meat unless one lives in abundance and wealth.”⁴

But this explanation only raises more questions. If the Torah were a financial guide, the original *Wall Street Journal*, then this financial advice to only consume according to your means would make sense. But we all know that, although the Torah may indeed provide us with financial planning wisdom, this is not its main concern. Rather, the Torah is concerned with teaching us how to be good people, lamplighters illuminating the world, the best Jews and purveyors of G-d’s wisdom we can be.

So we still don’t know what this means. *Why only when God expands your borders will you have a natural desire to eat meat, and why only then you may eat as much meat as you wish?*

4. The Midrash: Expansion Redefined

There is a beautiful and inspiring passage in the Midrash,⁵ which connects the expansion of Israel’s boundaries to a verse in the Book of Proverbs, *A man’s gift will expand him, and it will lead him before the great.*⁶ In so doing, it redefines the entire idea of broadening borders and expansionism. This is what the Midrash says:

³ Chulin 84a.

⁴ As per Rashi.

⁵ Deuteronomy Rabba 4:8. There are a few tales of this form of divine charitable expansion there.

⁶ Proverbs 18:16.

Rabi Elazar and Rabi Joshua went on the road to raise money for the community fund; they traveled to a distant city where lived a wealthy man, Aba Yudin, known for his kind heart and his great contributions to charity.

But time wreaked havoc with his estates and, unbeknown to the Rabbis, Aba Yudin had become a poor man. When he saw them approaching, he felt ashamed, realizing he couldn't afford to donate to their cause.

He was so embarrassed that he did not leave his house for several days. His wife noticed and questioned him about his sadness.

"The Rabbis are here and I can't give them a thing," he replied.

His pious wife then had an idea. "Don't we still own a little plot of land? Let's sell half of it and give them the money."

He followed her advice and, before departing, the Rabbis blessed him: "Aba Yudin, may the Lord return your wealth, for all the kind deeds you do."

The following day while Aba Yudin was plowing his small field, his plow hit something. When he dug it up, he uncovered a hidden casket full of diamonds and gold. And he became very wealthy, even wealthier than he had been before.

The next year, when the Rabbis returned, they inquired about Aba Yudin and were told about his great fortune.

When Aba Yudin heard they were in town, he rushed out to greet them. "Your prayers for me have multiplied tenfold!" he exclaimed.

They replied, "Although your gift was very small last year, we placed your name at the top of the list," and then they quoted this verse from Proverbs, "*A man's gift will expand him, and it will lead him before the great.*"

The Midrash is saying something very profound here: expansion does not happen when one **takes** more; rather, expansion happens when one **gives** more.

Many people feel that they will become more expansive once they have more means. Says the verse: No, it's the other way around: Bestow a gift and that will expand you and lead you before the great!

5. Kohelet and Sir Moses Montifore (Two Stories – A is Optional)

This profound idea is further enhanced by something I came across in *Celebrating Life*, the brilliant book by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom. Let me read you a short passage:

[A] Poor Kohelet. He was the man who wrote [the Book of] Ecclesiastes ... He was, we recall, the man who had it all and discovered it was not enough. Palaces, gardens, wives, wealth – all promised happiness. None delivered. The more wealth, the more worry. The more knowledge, the more weariness of spirit. In the end, all he could say was, “Meaningless, meaningless, everything is meaningless.” We recognize Kohelet. He is the billionaire with the private jet, the apartment on Fifth Avenue, the holiday home in Cap Ferrat, the Armani suits and expensive wife, who discovers that it all adds up to less than the sum of the parts. The route to happiness turns out to be harder than taking the waiting out of wanting.

Kohelet forgot something that I discovered by chance. Many years ago I went to visit one of the great religious leaders of the twentieth century, the Lubavitcher Rebbe. As I sat waiting to see him, I began talking to some of his followers. Among other things, they told me a story.

Someone had written to the Rebbe in a state of deep depression. The letter went something like this: “I would like the Rebbe’s help. I wake up each day sad and apprehensive. I can’t concentrate. I find it hard to pray. I keep the commandments, but I find no spiritual satisfaction. I go to the synagogue but I feel alone. I begin to wonder what life is about. I need help.”

The Rebbe wrote a brilliant reply that did not use a single word. All he did was this: he circled the first word of every sentence and sent the letter back. The disciple understood. The Rebbe had answered his question and set him on the path to recovery. The ringed word was "I."

It is hard to translate a biblical text from classical Hebrew into contemporary English, and still preserve the nuances of the original, but Kohelet's problem was the same as that of the letter-writer above. "I built for myself ... I planted for myself ... I acquired for myself..." In Hebrew, the insistence on the first person singular is striking, reiterated, discordant. There is no other book in the Bible that uses the word "I" so many times as so those first chapters of Ecclesiastes. Kohelet's problem was that he kept thinking about himself. It made him rich, powerful, a great success. As for happiness, thought, he did not have a chance. Happiness lives in the realm called "Not-I."

[B] There is a lovely story about the great Victorian Anglo-Jew, Sir Moses Montefiore. Montefiore⁷ was one of the outstanding figures of the nineteenth century. A close friend of Queen Victoria and knighted by her, he became the first Jew to attain high office in the City of London. He went on to become President of the Board of Deputies of British Jews, in effect the lay leader of the Jewish community, a role he held with distinction for many decades. A wealthy man, he retired at the age of 40 and devoted the rest of his long life – he lived to be 101 – to serving the Jewish people throughout the world as an international diplomat and philanthropist. He built the first almshouses in Jerusalem and the windmill overlooking the Old City. They are still there today. Yemin Moshe, Jerusalem's artists' quarter, is named after him.

⁷ Anecdotally: Montefiore was renowned for his quick and sharp wit. A popularly-circulated anecdote, possibly apocryphal, relates that at a dinner party he was once seated next to a nobleman who was known to be an anti-Semite. The nobleman told Montefiore that he had just returned from a trip to Japan, where "they have neither pigs nor Jews." Montefiore is reported to have responded immediately, "In that case, you and I should go there, so it will have a sample of each." (Novak, William. *The Big Book of Jewish Humor*. Harper, 1981. p.83.)

Someone once asked him, "Sir Moses, how much are you worth?" Moses thought for a while and named a figure. The other replied, "That can't be right. It's a large sum but not large enough. By my calculations you must be worth ten times that amount."

The reply Sir Moses gave was moving and wise. "You didn't ask me how much I own. You asked me how much I'm worth. So I calculated the amount I have given to charity this year, and that is the figure I gave you. You see," he said, "we are worth what we are willing to share with others."

He understood [what Kohelet did not] – that happiness is not made by what we own; it is what we share.⁸

6. Giving is Receiving and Expanding

Hold onto your seats, dear members of this sacred community, we are about to go on a perspective-altering, mind-changing, heart-pumping, soul-inspiring redefinition of everything you have ever known about borders, national allegiances, Israel's true power, and our purpose here on Planet Earth.

Israel is a geographical land, of course, but it is much, much more than that. Israel is the model in this world for everything good and holy, everything divine and righteous. In the verse from *Parshat Re'eh* that we have been discussing today, G-d speaks about His promise to Abraham – that the Land of Israel will expand and its borders will be broadened.

When will this promise be fulfilled? And how will this promise be fulfilled? Will it be fulfilled when Israel **takes** more or when Israel **gives** more? As with the story of Aba Yudin and Sir Moses Montifore, Israel's value and worth is not found in what it **takes** but in what it **gives**.

⁸ <http://askbigquestions.org/blog/201312/having-it-all>.

And, when Israel gives everything it has to give – which is light, inspiration, holiness, G-dliness, wisdom, love, kindness, charity, etc. – then as a direct result of that giving, Israel's borders will expand, for Israel's goodness and kindness and holiness will become contagious.

Indeed, it is no coincidence that G-d's promise mentions expansion until the Euphrates River. Today, it is that part of the world – Syria and Iraq to Israel's east and north – that needs Israel to show it the way. We – the Nation of Israel – must teach the world how to give, not take.

Throughout the planet, especially in the Middle East, people are taking, demanding, “Let me have mine,” in the name of “Allah,” in the name of “democracy,” in the name of “religion.” We must show them that the only way to solve the border problem – to expand borders and horizons, to stop the slaughter – is by giving. If you only have a small field, sell half and give it to those in need.

How do we do that? As they say, “charity begins at home.” Every Jew must give to his fellow Jew, spiritually, intellectually, and financially. This, the Torah guarantees, will solve all the “political” issues in Israel. When a non-Jew, a Muslim, an Arab, a Christian, an Atheist, sees the Jews as givers, as people of G-d, they will reach out to us in peace and harmony.

7. Connection with Meat

This also explains the connection with meat. When one is expansive, when one is a giver, only then can one truly enjoy meat.

Normally people eat meat as an indulgence – for selfish reasons, not out of necessity. You could survive without meat, but you like it so you eat it.

This selfish principle – me, me, I, I above all else – is the root of all war, hatred, border disputes, and refugee crises: “I don't need this to survive but I want it, even if it's at the expense of a hundred thousand lives.”

Says the Torah: “You can only enjoy this world, its pleasures and its luxuries, if you first become expansive, if you first become a giver.

If you only take, if you only cry 'Me, me, me,' then don't touch the meat – eat humble vegetables, but not meat. Meat is reserved only for those who know how to give to others, how to share, how to make the world higher, not how to consume it."

Normally when you eat meat, you expand, but the Torah says the exact opposite: first you must expand, only then can you eat meat.

8. Three Practical Suggestions

This leads me to three practical suggestions:

Conventional financial planning will tell you that when you are in a financial bind, when you are constricted, when your resources are limited, hold onto more and give less. The Torah says, "If you feel bounded, limited, confined, the single best way to expand your horizons and broaden your portfolio is to give."

Take one cause to give to and give – money for sure, but also of yourself. What you give, you will receive tenfold.

The same is true (maybe even more so) in our personal lives. Say a relationship with a spouse feels like it has reached its boundaries, and now it seems to be going around in circles. Says the Torah, "Expand your boundaries by giving." Give flowers, write a poem, give an hour a day dedicated solely to your soul-mate.

And, of course, this principle rings loud and true on an existential and cosmic level. We often feel confined by our seeming insignificance in the global scheme of things. How can I, a single human being, matter within the vast scale of reality?

The answer is – give and you shall change the world. When you are reaching outward to give, you are expanding by definition. Your mission is to go against any natural inclination to "bring in" whatever you see in this world, and instead to "reach out" and let your light illuminate wherever you see in this world.

This is the promise that G-d made to Abraham and which G-d will fulfill. When Abraham's offspring, you and I, embrace our mission and inheritance, namely to be "a light unto the nations" and change the world for the better, surely then our personal and universal borders will expand outward, blanketing the planet (including the Euphrates which today needs it most) in a holy and heavenly cloud of life, health and prosperity, both physically and spiritually, all in revealed manner.

9. Elul and Labor Day (Conclusion)

Today is the first day of *Rosh Chodesh Elul*. It is also, in the United States, the Labor Day Weekend.

As we prepare for a new year of school and work, as we prepare for the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah, we must ask ourselves how are we going to broaden our possibilities and expand our horizons. And we must answer by following the Torah's directive – we shall not expand by taking, but we shall expand by giving.

Expand your mind, expand your possibilities – and you will receive expansion in return. Expansiveness breeds expansiveness.

G-d said: "I will expand your literal and figurative borders when you give more, not when you take more. You can conquer lands by taking with expansionist force, or you can inspire minds by giving off light."

Israel influences by giving, not by taking – that goes for Israel the land and Israel the people.

On this Shabbat, a month before Rosh Hashanah, it is time to broaden our minds, expand our hearts, and give to each other and the world!

Shabbat Shalom!

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