



“The Five Books of Moses:
Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

47 Re'eh — Us and Them

Text

דברים יב

א אלה החקים והמשפטים אשר תשמרון לעשות בארץ אשר נתן יהוה אל הי אב תיך לך לרשתה כל-
הימים אשר אתם חיים על-האדמה. ב אבד תאבדון את-כל-המק מות אשר עבדו-שם הגוים אשר אתם
י רשים אתם את-אל היהם על-ההרים הרמים ועל-הגבעות ותחת כל-עץ רענן. ג ונתצתם את-
מזבח תם ושבתם את-מצב תם ואשריהם תשרפון באש ופסילי אל היהם תגדעון ואבדתם את-שמם
מן-המקום ההוא. ד ל א-תעשון כן ליהוה אל היכם. ה כי אם-אל-המקום אשר-יבחר יהוה אל היכם
מכל-שבטיכם לשום את-שמו שם לשכנו תדרשו ובאת שמה. ו והבאתם שמה ע ל תיכם וזבחיכם ואת
מעשר תיכם ואת תרומת ידכם ונדב תיכם ובכ ר ת בקרכם וצ א נכם. ז ואכלתם-שם לפני
יהוה אל היכם ושמחתם בכל ל משלח ידכם אתם ובתיכם אשר ברבך יהוה אל היך. ח ל א תעשון ככל
אשר אנחנו ע שים פ ה היום איש כל-הישר בעיניו. ט כי ל א-באתם עד-עתה אל-המנוחה ואל-הנחלה
אשר-יהוה אל היך נתן לך. י ועברתם את-הירדן וישבתם בארץ אשר-יהוה אל היכם מנחיל אתכם
והניח לכם מכל-א וביכם מסביב וישבתם-בטח. יא והיה המקום אשר-יבחר יהוה אל היכם בו לשכן
שמו שם שמה תביאו את כל-אשר אנ כי מצוה אתכם עול תיכם וזבחיכם מעשר תיכם ותרמת ידכם
וכ ל מבחר נדריכם אשר תדרו ליהוה. יב ושמחתם לפני יהוה אל היכם אתם ובניכם ובנ תיכם
ועבדיכם ואמה תיכם והלוי אשר בשעריכם כי אין לו חלק ונחלה אתכם. יג השמר לך פן-תעלה
ע ל תיך בכל-מקום אשר תראה. יד כי אם-במקום אשר-יבחר יהוה באחד שבטיך שם תעלה ע ל תיך
ושם תעשה כ ל אשר אנ כי מצוה. טו רק בכל-אות נפשך תזבח ואכלת בשר כברכת יהוה אל היך אשר
נתן-לך בכל-שעריך הטמא והטהור י אכלנו כצבי וכאיל. טז רק הדם ל א ת אכלו על-הארץ תשפכנו
כמים. יז ל א-תוכל לאכ ל בשעריך מעשר דגנך ותיר שך ויצהרך ובכ ר ת בקרך וצ אנה וכל-נדריך
אשר תדר ונדב תיך ותרומת ידך. יח כי אם-לפני יהוה אל היך ת אכלנו במקום אשר יבחר יהוה
אל היך בו אתה ובנך ובתך ועבדך ואמתך והלוי אשר בשעריך ושמחת לפני יהוה אל היך בכל ל משלח
ידך. יט השמר לך פן-תעזב את-הלוי כל-ימך על-אדמתך. {ס} כ כי-ירחיב יהוה אל היך את-גבלך
כאשר דבר-לך ואמרת א כלה בשר כיי-תאוה נפשך לאכ ל בשר בכל-אות נפשך ת אכל בשר. כא כי-
ירחק ממך המקום אשר יבחר יהוה אל היך לשום שמו שם וזבחת מבקרך ומצ אנה אשר נתן יהוה לך
כאשר צויתך ואכלת בשעריך בכל ל אות נפשך. כב אך כאשר יאכל את-הצבי ואת-האיל כן ת אכלנו
הטמא והטהור יחדו י אכלנו. כג רק חזק לבלתי אכ ל הדם כי הדם הוא הנפש ול א-ת אכל הנפש עם-
הבשר. כד ל א ת אכלנו על-הארץ תשפכנו כמים. כה ל א ת אכלנו למען ייטב לך ולבניך אחריך כי-
תעשה הישר בעיני יהוה. כו רק קדשיך אשר-יהיו לך ונדריך תשא ובאת אל-המקום אשר-יבחר יהוה.
כז ועשית ע ל תיך הבשר והדם על-מזבח יהוה אל היך ודם-זבחיך ישפך על-מזבח יהוה אל היך
והבשר ת אכל. כח שמ ר ושמעת את כל-הדברים האלה אשר אנ כי מצוה למען ייטב לך ולבניך אחריך
עד-עולם כי תעשה הטוב והישר בעיני יהוה אל היך. {ס} כט כי-יכרית יהוה אל היך את-הגוים אשר
אתה בא-שמה לרשת אותם מפניך וירשת אתם וישבת בארצם. ל השמר לך פן-תנקש אחריהם אחרי
השמים מפניך ופן-תדר ש לאל היהם לאמר איכה יעבדו הגוים האלה את-אל היהם ואעשה-כן גם-
אני. לא ל א-תעשה כן ליהוה אל היך כי כל-תועבת יהוה אשר שנא עשו לאל היהם כי גם את-בניהם
ואת-בנ תיהם ישרפו באש לאל היהם.



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Devarim 12

1 These are the laws and rules that you must carefully observe in the land that the Lord, God of your ancestors, is giving you to possess, as long as you live on earth. 2 You must destroy all the sites at which the nations you are to dispossess worshiped their gods, whether on lofty mountains and on hills or under any luxuriant tree. 3 Tear down their altars, smash their pillars, put their sacred posts to the fire, and cut down the images of their gods, obliterating their name from that site.

4 Do not worship the Lord your God in like manner, 5 but look only to the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as Her/His habitation, to establish Her/His name there. There you are to go, 6 and there you are to bring your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, your votive and freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and flocks. 7 Together with your households, you shall feast there before the Lord your God, happy in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you.

8 You shall not act at all as we now act here, every person as s/he pleases, 9 because you have not yet come to the allotted haven that the Lord your God is giving you. 10 When you cross the Jordan and settle in the land that the Lord your God is allotting to you, and S/He grants you safety from all your enemies around you and you live in security, 11 then you must bring everything that I command you to the site where the Lord your God will choose to establish Her/His name: your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, and all the choice votive offerings that you vow to the Lord. 12 And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your sons and daughters and with your male and female slaves, along with the Levite in your settlements, for he has no territorial allotment among you.

13 Take care not to sacrifice your burnt offerings in any place you like, 14 but only in the place that the Lord will choose in one of your tribal territories. There you shall sacrifice your burnt offerings and there you shall observe all that I enjoin upon you. 15 But whenever you desire, you may slaughter and eat meat in any of your settlements, according to the blessing that the Lord your God has granted you. The unclean and the clean alike may partake of it, as of the gazelle and the deer. 16 But you must not partake of the blood; you shall pour it out on the ground like water.

17 You may not partake in your settlements of the tithes of your new grain or wine or oil, or of the firstlings of your herds and flocks, or of any of the votive offerings that you vow, or of your freewill offerings, or of your contributions. 18 These you must consume before the Lord your God in the place that the Lord your God will choose — you and your sons and your daughters, your male and female slaves, and the Levite in your settlements — happy before the Lord your God in all your undertakings. 19 Be sure not to neglect the Levite as long as you live in your land.

20 When the Lord enlarges your territory, as S/He has promised you, and you say, "I shall eat some meat," for you have the urge to eat meat, you may eat meat whenever you wish. 21 If the place where the Lord has chosen to establish Her/His name is too far from you, you may slaughter any of the cattle or sheep that the Lord gives you, as I have instructed you; and you may eat to your heart's



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content in your settlements. 22 Eat it, however, as the gazelle and the deer are eaten: the unclean may eat it together with the clean. 23 But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for the blood is the life, and you must not consume the life with the flesh. 24 You must not partake of it; you must pour it out on the ground like water: 25 you must not partake of it, in order that it may go well with you and with your descendants to come, for you will be doing what is right in the sight of the Lord.

26 But such sacred and votive donations as you may have shall be taken by you to the site that the Lord will choose. 27 You shall offer your burnt offerings, both the flesh and the blood, on the altar of the Lord your God; and of your other sacrifices, the blood shall be poured out on the altar of the Lord your God, and you shall eat the flesh.

28 Be careful to heed all these commandments that I enjoin upon you; thus it will go well with you and with your descendants after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God.

29 When the Lord your God has cut down before you the nations that you are about to enter and dispossess, and you have dispossessed them and settled in their land, 30 beware of being lured into their ways after they have been wiped out before you! Do not inquire about their gods, saying, "How did those nations worship their gods? I too will follow those practices." 31 You shall not act thus toward the Lord your God, for they perform for their gods every abhorrent act that the Lord detests; they even offer up their sons and daughters in fire to their gods.

Context

At the outset, Parshat Re'eh offers us the possibility of divine blessing and curse. When they enter the Promised Land, the Israelites will need to destroy all aspects of idolatry. Then, they will live in security, free to observe Jewish religious practices - focused on the place where the divine chooses for the Name to dwell. There they shall eat and rejoice in the sacred service, and provide for the Levi'im who officiate. Avoiding the temptation to follow heathen practices requires vigilance, and even the death penalty for false prophets and diviners - those who lead the people astray.

The parasha specifies which creatures are *kosher*-fit for eating – on land, in water, and in the air. The produce of the land must also be made fit by bringing portions, tithes, to the sacred place.

The seventh year, the sabbatical, is a year of release – of both debts and bondage. The Torah requires the remission of all monetary debts. Safety mechanisms are in place to ensure that people will continue to lend money to the needy through to the end of the sixth year in the sabbatical cycle. Slaves are to be set free unless they freely choose to stay with their master.



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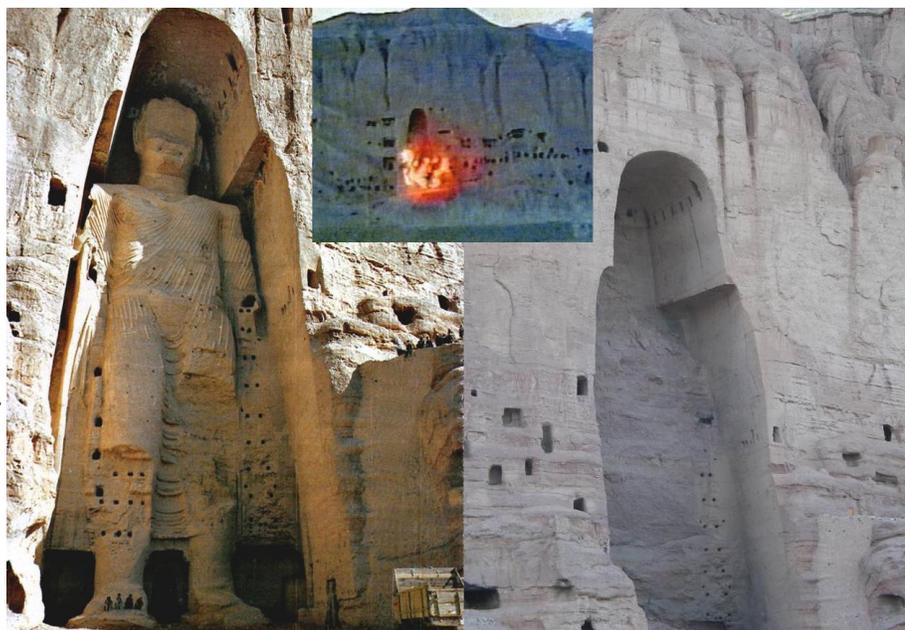
The last chapter summarizes the essence of the observances of the three *regalim*-pilgrim festivals - according to the harvest cycle, from Pesach in the spring through Shavuot and Sukkot in the autumn. Each festival provides for the needy and landless.

Explorations

Among Moshe's talks that prepare the Children of Israel for life in the Promised Land, Parshat Re'eh differentiates between Israelite-Jewish sacred service and forbidden heathen service, between identity and difference, between self and *other*, between blessing and curse, between life and death.

In an effort to guide the people toward faithfulness to their religious tradition, the Torah makes a strict separation between Israelite practice and forbidden Canaanite worship. After the conquest of the Canaanite peoples who inhabited the Promised Land prior to the arrival of the Israelites, all remnants of Canaanite worship were to be erased. Upon possessing the land, the Israelites are charged to destroy every sign of idolatry – the sites, altars, pillars and posts, images, “obliterating their name from that site” (Devarim 12:2). They are to uproot heathen practices from homes and villages, “whether on lofty mountains and on hills or under any luxuriant tree” (Devarim 12:2).

Such passages conjure images of the Taliban's destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan in 2001. The two Buddhas — one was 165 feet high, the other 114 feet — were carved into the sandstone face of the mountain at Bamiyan, most likely in the seventh century A.D. by Buddhist monks, thousands of whom once lived in the caves and grottoes along the two colossi. With their flowing Greek robes draped in stone over the familiar look of sub-continental Buddhas, the sculptures were a sublime fusion of the Hellenic influence on the region dating back to Alexander the Great's conquests around 330 B.C. and the South Asian influence that prevailed until the Arab-Muslim conquests of the 9th century. ([Click here for more info](#))



The destruction of the Canaanite religious artifacts commanded by the Torah, and the contemporary destruction of the Buddha carvings in Afghanistan raise questions about



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ferocious religious intolerance and zealotry. What reasons could justify violent behavior toward *other* religions/beliefs, then and now? In the Israelite case, how can we reconcile such an approach with the divine to whom we attribute mercy and love?

The Torah explains how fear underlies the proscriptions - lest the Israelites succumb to idolatry. One reason for intolerance is the view that idolatry is irresistible,

Beware of being lured into their ways after they have been wiped out before you! Do not inquire about their gods, saying, "How did those nations worship their gods? I too will follow those practices." (Devarim 12:30)

This verse acknowledges that the fear persists even *after* idolatry has been “wiped out”. While wiping out statues does not destroy ideas and temptations, breaking idols has been a method used to help shift ideas and beliefs.

The commandment to destroy idols expresses a form of Jewish iconoclasm – a critical, rebellious, innovative spirit deeply rooted in Jewish tradition. Many legends explain the choice of Avram as the original progenitor of Jewish faith.

Among the most famous is an ancient midrash in Bereishit Rabba (38:13),

R. Chiya said in the name of R. Ada of Yaffo:

Terach [Avraham's father] was an idol worshipper, and he also sold idols. One day he went somewhere, and left Avraham to sell in his place... A woman arrived, holding a plate of grain. She said to Avraham: "Take this and offer it before them." Avraham got up, took a stick in his hands and broke all the idols, leaving the stick in the hand of the largest one.

When his father returned, he asked: "Who did this to them?"

Avraham answered, "What have I to hide? A woman came, carrying a plate of grain. She said to me, 'Take this and offer it before them.' I offered it before them, and this one here said, 'I shall eat first.' Then that one said, 'I shall eat first.' The largest idol got up, took the stick, and shattered them!"

Terach said: "What nonsense are you telling me – are they then conscious?"

Avraham answered, "Do your ears not hear what your lips are saying?"

This midrash might be based on a story with similar themes in the book of *Shoftim*-Judges – during the early days of Gidon the Judge,

It happened that night that God said to him: "Take your father's bull... and pull down the altar of Ba'al that belongs to your father, and cut down the ashera [a Semitic mother goddess] that is upon it. You shall build an altar to the Lord your God at the top of that fortress..."



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Gidon took ten men of his servants and did as God had spoken to him. Since he feared his father's household and the men of the city, he could not do it by day, so he did it by night.

The people of the city awoke early in the morning, and behold – the altar of Ba'al was pulled down, and the ashera atop it was cut down... They said to one another, "Who did this thing?" They inquired and investigated, and they said: "Gidon the son of Yoash did this thing."

The people of the city said to Yoash, "Bring out your son that he may die, for he has pulled down the altar of Ba'al and has cut down the ashera atop it."

Yoash said to all who stood against him: "Will you then fight on behalf of Ba'al; will you then rescue him? Whoever fights for him – let him die by morning; if he is a god, let him fight for himself, for his altar is destroyed."

On that day, he called him Yeruba'al, saying, "Let Ba'al fight against him, for he has pulled down his altar." (Shoftim 6:25-32)

The empirical lesson breaks resistance to a new conception, a different approach founded on reason. In both stories, a bold young person challenges idolatry by destroying idols to demonstrate their impotence. The purpose is educational - to prove the emptiness attributed to heathen belief.

The Torah explains that the Canaanite rituals were so utterly degraded that they could not be tolerated,

You shall not act thus toward the Lord your God, for they perform for their gods every abhorrent act that the Lord detests; they even offer up their sons and daughters in fire to their gods. (Devarim 12:31)

Verses in VaYiqra also prohibit the offering of children to honor Moloch, an ancient Ammonite god (VaYiqra 18:21), practicing sodomy and bestiality (VaYiqra 18:23, 24, 20:3). The Torah deems the gravity of Canaanite immorality to justify the need to exterminate the practices and their implements. Child sacrifice – burning in fire - is one such Canaanite ritual.

The commandment in our parasha to destroy heathen practice derives from the Torah's claim to the absolute ethical superiority of Israelite practice. This attitude is not in the least politically correct in our era of liberalism and pluralism. People widely believe that no one culture or belief has any privileged claim to truth. Today it is commonplace knowledge that no-one has clear, unimpeded judgement; rather, every person sees through a lens ground by history and experience, by culture and perspective. This approach often sustains



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“ethical relativism” – the claim that there is no *true* vantage point from which to evaluate the attitudes and practices of *other* cultures. Accordingly, we respect the entitlement of all to pursue their practices. This attitude often leads to a non-interference and disengagement of people from one another. It can also tolerate cruelty and even evil. Against relativism, the Torah adamantly rejects tolerance for practices that offend its core values.



Returning to the example of the Taliban destroying the Buddhas, we need to inquire whether the purpose is to improve and refine the ethical practices of society, to honor and increase human and divine dignity. In relation to Israeli society, we deem the destruction of relics of idolatrous Canaanite worship to be inappropriate to our current context. This 13th century clay Canaanite fertility goddess is housed in the esteemed and extensive “Land of Canaan” collection at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem ([Photo © Israel Museum, Jerusalem, by David Harris](#)).

In our time, there is some consensus that physical destruction, purging religious or cultural artifacts offends respect for diversity (see study link below). How to negotiate the co-existence of mutually exclusive religious and cultural beliefs and practices is an ongoing challenge for all of humanity.

Jewish tradition has contributed substantially toward the gradual unfolding of human values through centuries of striving for more refined ethics. The sacredness and dignity of human life are foundational to that striving. How these values will continue to evolve and become better fulfilled is our responsibility as empowered interpreters of our tradition. Fulfilling them with compassion and respect for all human beings, women and men, non-Jew and Jew, is one of the challenges that our current moment in history poses to Jewish tradition.

Questions for Discussion

One Catholic theologian cites wrath as one of the divine attributes,

The wrath of God is His [sic] eternal detestation of all unrighteousness. It is the displeasure and indignation of Divine equity against evil. It is the holiness of God stirred into activity against sin. It is the moving cause of that just sentence which He passes upon evil-doers. God is angry against sin because it is a rebelling against His authority, a wrong done to His inviolable sovereignty. Insurrectionists against God’s government shall be made to know that God is the Lord. They shall be made to feel how great that Majesty is which they despise, and how dreadful is that threatened wrath which they so little regarded. Not that God’s anger is a malignant and malicious retaliation, inflicting injury for the sake of it, or in return for injury received. No; while God will vindicate His dominion as Governor of the universe, He will not be vindictive. (A. W. Pink, *The Attributes of God* (Swengel PA: Reiner Publications, 1968 [Reprint]), 78.)



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In the Torah, God destroys the world and its creatures by the flood soon after creating it, and threatens destruction in response to many human failures. According to A.W. Pink, God's anger is not specifically related to human actions against morality, but to actions against his authority and sovereignty. Do you agree with this reading of the God of the Torah? Discuss your view of divine anger – its purposes and effects – for you personally, and for communities.

Discuss our role in making ethical judgments about *others*. On what basis, if any, do you feel comfortable or compelled to make such judgments? When ought we to get involved in other people's practices?

Study Links

Concerning the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan by the Taliban, UNESCO adopted the following resolution “[concerning the Intentional Destruction of Cultural Heritage](#)” on Oct 17, 2003:

The General Conference of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization meeting in Paris at its thirty-second session in 2003,

Recalling the tragic destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan that affected the international community as a whole,

Expressing serious concern about the growing number of acts of intentional destruction of cultural heritage,

Referring to Article I(2)(c) of the Constitution of UNESCO that entrusts UNESCO with the task of maintaining, increasing and diffusing knowledge by “assuring the conservation and protection of the world’s inheritance of books, works of art and monuments of history and science, and recommending to the nations concerned the necessary international conventions”,

Recalling the principles of all UNESCO’s conventions, recommendations, declarations and charters for the protection of cultural heritage,

Mindful that cultural heritage is an important component of the cultural identity of communities, groups and individuals, and of social cohesion, so that its intentional destruction may have adverse consequences on human dignity and human rights,

Reiterating one of the fundamental principles of the Preamble of the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict providing that “damage to cultural property belonging to any people whatsoever means damage to the cultural heritage of all mankind, since each people makes its contribution to the culture of the world”



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Do you think that it is intentional that the resolution refers to "cultural" heritage, and not to "religious" heritage? Is there any significant difference between these two ways of defining the Taliban's destructive act?

Summary of Issues

While the commandment to destroy the sacred materials affiliated with heathen ritual is ruthless, perhaps the iconoclasm aims toward the ongoing refinement of human ethics and sacred service.

Methods & Observations

Parshat Re'eh demonstrates one of the Torah's educational methods – prohibitions and destruction is to make way for substantive, compelling alternatives. Destruction is not a value in itself, but rather a means to the Torah's conception of sacred service. Along with the negative commandments in relation to heathen practice, our parasha offers positive directives. In Re'eh, we see a clear goal – to diminish distractions and focus on the central site where the sacred one Divine Name is to abide and where we are to perform the new service. To that place, the people are to direct their sacred offerings, and from that place, sacredness derives.

You shall not act at all as we now act here, every person as s/he pleases, because you have not yet come to the allotted haven that the Lord your God is giving you. When you cross the Jordan and settle in the land that the Lord your God is allotting to you, and S/He grants you safety from all your enemies around you and you live in security, then you must bring everything that I command you to the site where the Lord your God will choose to establish Her/His name: your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, and all the choice votive offerings that you vow to the Lord. (Devarim 12:8-11)

Living and sustenance are to be embroiled in a new form of sacred service that replaces heathen idolatry. The text describes bringing and eating sacrificial offerings and offerings based on oaths, tithes, and first fruits and animals.

Moshe lists the groups of people who participate in the different types of worship before God. In our parasha, the lists include daughters and female servants along with sons and male servants.

Then you must bring everything that I command you to the site where the Lord your God will choose to establish Her/His name: your burnt offerings and other sacrifices, your tithes and contributions, and all the choice votive offerings that you vow to the Lord. And you shall rejoice before the Lord your God with your sons and daughters and with your male and female slaves, along with the Levite in your settlements, for s/he has no territorial allotment among you. (Devarim 12:11-12)



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In a later passage about the pilgrimage festivals, the text includes the Levite, stranger, orphan, and widow along with all of the household members in the commandment to eat and rejoice before God.

You should be happy before the Lord your God; you, your son and your daughter and your male servant and your female servant and the Levite and the stranger and the orphan and the widow that is in your midst; in the place that the Lord your God will choose as the dwelling place of God's name." (Deuteronomy 16:11)

The verse begins with the instruction to rejoice before God on festival celebrations. While the commandment addresses the head of the household - everyone else is included in reference to him/her (for example, "your male servant . . . the widow that is in your midst"), the commandment to rejoice expressly includes everyone – according to gender, class, and social status. By contrast with descriptions in the Book of VaYiqra, our parasha includes women in the joy of the sacred service. With time and the workings of history and creative drive, the Temple form will evolve from sacrificial life-taking to a life-affirming service of the heart.

Contact

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