

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



R'EI

Holy Ambiguity

Everybody wants to proudly be aware and declare who they really are. We readily identify people by certain realities in their lives: male or female, lefty or righty, Red Sox fans (good) or Yankee fans (bad). *Ed. note: Giants fan, even better.* Let's make believe for the moment that we're only dealing with binary possibilities. So, we try to pigeon hole ourselves into these categories, but then we encounter someone who suggests that we get in touch with our 'feminine side' or we notice that we throw with our left hand but bat from the 'right side' (like me and Ricky Henderson). It can get complicated.

This complexity is also noted within Jewish tradition; this reality is clearly built into the fabric of our religion and lifestyle. Rav Soloveitchik famously pointed out the reality of duality in his analysis of Adam 1 and Adam 2 from the differences in the Creation accounts from chapters 1 and 2 of B'reishit. That was in *The Lonely Man of Faith*. However, he also wrote *Halchic Man*.

In *Halachic Man* (Hebrew 1944, English 1980), he posits that there are

two categories of humans trying to understand or interact with reality: Homo Cognitivas (cognitive or intelligent person) and Homo Religiosis (religious or spiritual person). The HC individual attempts to understand reality through scientific observation and inquiry. The HR personality, on the other hand, is driven by the religious and mystical impulse to transcend physical reality and strive for an esoteric spiritual existence.

Then the Rav describes the synthesis of these two archetypes into Halachic Man, who analyzes the physical reality to make life decisions which are based upon a Jewish legal reality which nature has dictated. Example: One observes a beautiful sunrise and immediately declares: Time to daven!

Observation of reality triggers Halachic reactions.

This week's Torah reading seems to anticipate these categories described by Rav Soloveitchik. We are told to be very careful about our behavior (specifically: Don't self-mutilate). Then God declares: For you are a people consecrated to the Eternal your God: the Eternal your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be the treasured one. (D'varim 14:3)

In other words: Your behavior must be special (usually expressed as 'holy') because you are very special

(Hebrew: SEGULA, perhaps 'precious') to Me.

Immediately after this declaration the Torah informs us about eating meat. What's the connection between being carnivorous and being holy or special?

Well, in the pre-modern world eating meat was very special and relatively rare (which is how I like my meat). I've mentioned in a previous article that the term for good news in Hebrew is BESOROT TOVOT. The term for news (BESOROT) probably is based on the word BASAR for meat. Also, in this week's parsha we have the third appearance of the law about not eating meat with dairy, and each of those instances is in close proximity to the listing of the three pilgrimage festivals (Pesach, Shavuot, Sukkot). Why? Because, I believe strongly, in the ancient world most of our ancestors only ate meat on CHAGIM.

However, there's one other issue in play here. Until this section about the Kosher animals, the Torah seems to have only allowed the consumption of meat as part of a sacrifice. Here, before the Jews' entry into the Holy Land we introduce the concept of BASAR TA'AVA ('meat of desire' or 'meat of appetite').

On a logical level, this makes a lot of sense. In the Desert, the Jews all lived within a few minutes walk from

the Mishkan, where the sacrifices were offered. However, in Eretz Yisrael most Jews would live quite distant from the religious center, first in Shilo and then in Yerushalayim. Having to shlepp to the Temple for a corned beef sandwich was not reasonable. Hence, the introduction of BASAR TA'AVA, or non-holy meat consumption.

But how should we view this innovation? Was this a concession based upon a relaxation of the spiritual level attained in the desert encampment or was this, perhaps, a presentation of the 'norm' of Jewish life?

Was there, perhaps, a dichotomy? Is the Torah presenting two possibilities? Even though the Jews, for practical reasons, were going to be permitted to eat 'normal' Kosher meat, perhaps we're still being warned to be cautious in our interactions with the world and its pleasures. Maybe, the 'special' Jews would refrain from eating meat except in the holy Temple precinct. Again, we do list the Pilgrimage festivals soon after the rules of meat consumption.

Is this, perhaps, similar to the NAZIR? 'Special' people who refrain from haircuts, wine and ritual impurity. Curious, our Sages define SIMCHA (joy) as including wine and meat.

What's the point? I believe strongly

that the Torah gives us choices. We can freely choose to be a version of Homo Religiosis, who may become a NAZIR or refrain from eating meat except when connected to the Temple offerings, or we can freely choose to be the Halachic Human who is integrated into the world at large but carefully maintains Halachic norms.

Anyone who claims that there is only one path is either a fan of the Mandalorian ('This is the Way') or belongs to a cultish version of Judaism. Our communities thrive when we have this marvelous mix of outlooks and even lifestyles in our society.

A demand of total conformity is just unhealthy to the body politic. I'm not saying let 'a thousand flowers blossom' (a la Mao). We do have standards of Halacha and Midot. However, we're also not (or, at least, shouldn't be) strict conformists. I'm a bit disappointed when I join a minyan and everyone looks exactly the same (except for me, and at one such minyan factory, it was clear that they waited for an eleventh Jew, so as not to count me for the minyan).

I love that our parsha can be read to mean: Be yourself! I have this bad feeling that when we don't think for ourselves, we might stop thinking at all. 🙏