

Judaism Has Sent You a Friend Request

There are Jewish populations in every corner of the globe. As Rabbi Larry Milder tunefully teaches, “wherever you go, there’s always someone Jewish.” But the question we have to ask ourselves is how do we keep Judaism from becoming diluted when its people are so spread out?

This week we read *Parshat Re’eh*, deep in the heart of the book of *D’varim*. This section of *Torah* is rich with commentaries on daily living and guidance for how to act. The multilayered *parshah* begins with a warning about rewards and punishments with blessings and curses and then moves on to focus on a central place of worship that is appropriate for the Israelites. The text also warns us of false prophets, guides us in our eating practices, teaches us how to take care of one another and explains how to celebrate the *Shalosh Regalim*, the three pilgrimage festivals of *Pesach*, *Shavuot* and *Sukkot*.

The overarching theme of the *parshah* appears to be establishing both a way of life and a connection to one another. Concerned about the spreading out of the Israelites and the influence the other nations might have on their culture, God instructs them in chapter 12 saying, “Do not worship the Lord your God in like manner, but look only to the site that the Lord your God will choose amidst all your tribes as his habitation to establish his name there.”

The *Torah* recognizes that the Israelites are living in a world with other religions and that these religions might have an influence over the ways that the Israelites worship. The other nations had altars and ritual grounds scattered throughout the country; wherever they needed a place to connect with their god, they set up an altar. In a certain sense, we see this happening with the Israelites throughout the *Torah* too. Altars are set up along the route in *sefer Bereshit* as God’s presence is made known throughout the journey. But now, God wants there to be one unified location for sacrifice to God.

The timing of this moment makes sense. It could only happen after the Israelites arrived in their own land. As they journeyed through the desert, they were one people in one location, but as they settle in their land, the people will spread far and wide, and the unity felt at that moment might never again be reached. God’s commandment is religious insurance that at least three times a year (*Shalosh Regalim*), the people will come together.

When they occupied one region, this sounded like a reasonable plan. But what happens when the Israelites are exiled? Or when they start to live too far away to make the journey? And how far is too far from the one place that *Adonai* has chosen? Ancient rabbis shared their thoughts: perhaps “too far” meant outside the Temple court or a journey of more than three days. But maybe a question more appropriate for us today is how can we stay connected? In our time, it isn’t so much the place that matters, but connectivity and relationships.

Today’s society has become more and more connected. We’ve gone from “leave a message after the beep” to being able to instantly reach people through a dozen different methods. Now we can text, tweet, email, call a mobile phone and more. In fact, we’re finding it increasingly more difficult to go “out of range” where technology will not work and someone would actually need to leave a message.

There are several lessons to learn here. Like the Israelites who knew their compact, united community was about to spread and were given a central location to connect with God and each other, we still need to make our physical places count. Now that families can be separated by oceans and still Skype face to face, taking the time to actually be in the same location where we can make physical contact is more

important than ever. On the other hand, without the possibility of a Jewish religion reunion (even if we could find a hotel big enough, the catering would be crazy), we have to find ways to reconnect with God and our traditions. Whatever the *Makom* - the place - may be, our challenge is to make the place count. Staying connected to people has become easier and easier. May we strive to make the same enthusiastic effort to “like,” “follow,” and spend some much needed FaceTime with our beautiful tradition.

ללמוד **To Learn:** ללמד **To Teach:** our families are often spread over the globe. Search your family tree, see where you have relatives. If you find that your roots were in a country that speaks a new language, learn to say “Hello” in that language.

לשמור **To Keep:** לעשות **To Do:** Start once with a day without technology, Shabbat or another day. Use that day as one to reconnect with the people you live with, in person.