

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Whenever they stepped out of line in the desert, the punishment was swift and painful. Fire consumed them. The earth swallowed them. Snakes bit them. Illness befell them. As Moshe tells them in Devarim 8:5, "Bear in mind that the LORD your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son." But in the Land, just as there will be no obvious and direct miracles, there will be no obvious and direct punishments. And there won't be a leader with singular clear access to God's thoughts and desires who can lay out the right path so clearly.

In the Land, the only indicator of whether God is happy with the Israelites is rain - the key to any long-term success. As they are told in Devarim 11:10-12:

For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the LORD your God looks after, on which the LORD your God always keeps His eye, from the year's beginning to the year's end.

The Land of Israel is special to God because it is rain-land. Faith-land. It has no river like the Nile or the Tigris and Euphrates to power the irrigation necessary for a mass civilization. Those dwelling in the Land of Israel have to put in the work, but it is all for naught if forces beyond their control do not cooperate. And the only hope to influence those forces is to be humble in the face of them, and to appreciate them.

Modern Jewish thinkers have rejected this idea that mitzvah performance can influence the weather. The Reform Movement went so far as to remove this paragraph from their prayer book many years ago. But I personally find the message both powerful and important. Security and abundance lead to overconfidence in our merit, our skill, and the solidity and reliability of the world around us. And this overconfidence can quickly lead to arrogance, callousness, and eventually cruelty. We often use our own struggles and victories over adversity to justify not offering more assistance to others.

But so much of the good in our lives is on account of people being more loving, kind, and decent than they have to be. And that is God at work. True security is not achieved by looking out for oneself, but by building a more compassionate world. The Torah thus reminds us that God does not only clear our path of enemies but also "upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing." (10:18) We were once a nation of orphans and widows, strangers with no food and clothing. God's treatment of us is the model for how we are to treat others, and how we treat others is the true test of our loyalty to God.



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Ekev

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

August 24, 2019 | 23 Av 5779

Annual (Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25): Etz Hayim p. 1037-1054; Hertz p. 780-793
 Triennial (Deuteronomy 10:12-11:25): Etz Hayim p. 1048-1054; Hertz p. 789-793
 Haftarah (Isaiah 49:14-51:3): Etz Hayim p. 1055-1060; Hertz p. 794-798

D'var Torah: The Loyalty Test

Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz, Conservative Yeshiva Director of Engagement

The most familiar part of Parashat Ekev comes toward the end, in chapter 11, verses 13-14 when Moshe, speaking in God's voice, tells the Israelites: "If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day...I will grant the rain for your land in season." This is, of course, the second paragraph of the Shema, recited twice daily to fulfill the command to recite them when we lie down and rise up, and written on parchment and stuffed into tefillin and mezuzot so that we can fulfill the command to impress them on our hearts, bind them on our hands, let them be symbols on our forehead, and inscribe them on our doorposts.

But what is the larger context here? And why this emphasis on rain?

The Israelites are about to take a major developmental step as they enter the Land. In the desert, God was ever-present and miracles were obvious - whether in defeating enemies or providing manna. In the Land of Israel, the Israelites have to fight their enemies, establish settlements, and work to produce their own food. This is an important step - a good one - one that God desires. But it is fraught with peril. In the desert, Israelite dependence made them faithful - faithful enough to take this next step (unlike their parents who perished in the desert). But in the Land of Israel, with God taking a step back, the Israelites can easily come to the mistaken belief that they are entirely responsible for their success and comfort. And they will break faith with God and Torah.

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D'var Haftarah: Look to the Rock

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This second of the seven haftarot of consolation (Shiva d'nehamta), which follow Tisha b'Av, is a series of prophecies offering messages of strength to those who needed encouragement to return from Babylonian exile to the Judean homeland in Eretz Yisrael. It was also a message of encouragement to those in the Judean homeland challenged with absorbing the returnees. This message is encapsulated in one particular prophecy at the end of the haftarah: "Look to the rock you were hewn from and to the quarry from which you were cut. Look to Avraham your father and to Sarah who spawned you. For he was the one whom I summoned, and I blessed him and made him many." (51:1-2)

This prophecy draws an analogy between the founders of the faith, Avraham and Sarah, and those who would return from the Babylonian exile. Just as Avraham and Sarah left Ur-Kasdim in what would become Babylonia to go to Eretz Canaan, so, too, the Babylonian exiles would leave their temporary homes and return to the land of Judea and there, become a multitudinous nation. In this prophecy, Avraham is symbolically represented by "the rock" and Sarah by the quarry. Together, Avraham and Sarah model for the returnees the mission of rebuilding and repopulating the Jewish homeland.

The intent of this message was not exclusively to encourage the returnees. It also presented a subtle message to those who were not pleased that the Jews of Babylonia were returning. A verse from Ezekiel indicates that some among those who remained in Judea opposed their return because of its burden and/or the fear of being overwhelmed by the returnees: "these dwellers among the ruins on the soil of Israel are saying, Avraham was but one, and he took hold of the land, but we are many. To us has been given the land as an inheritance." (33:24) (See S. Paul, Isaiah 40-66, Mikra L'Yisrael, pp. 321-2) If this interpretation is indeed the "pshat" or plain meaning of this prophecy, then it was meant as a subtle message to the "natives" who opposed the return of the "refugee" population to Judea that God intended for them to return. The prophet also wanted the refugees to know that their role was no less significant before God than that of those who remained throughout the exile.

This message resonates on so many levels with social problems faced both in Israel and abroad, especially in the US and in Europe. Conflicts between those who consider themselves natives and those who are newcomers are not a new phenomenon. They are and always will be a societal constant. Those who are longtime inhabitants fear that their place in society and their culture will be usurped, while the newcomers only want to feel a part of their new homeland without being treated as aliens. The answer posed by the prophet is that all must feel themselves hewn from a common rock from a common quarry, creating for themselves a common mission in which they will treat each other in kind.

Parashat Ekev Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Moshe continues his review of the national history and future relationship with God in the land, stressing the many good qualities of the land that they are about to inherit and warning of what could go wrong if they leave God and the *Mitzvot*.

- 1) Moshe reassures the people that God will remove from them all illnesses and all the afflictions of Egypt (7:15). Why do you think that the specific afflictions of Egypt are mentioned?
- 2) When the people will enter the land and conquer the local people, they are commanded to burn the statues of their gods, and not covet the gold and silver on them (7:25-26). Why do you think that we are not allowed to "recycle" the precious metals for our use or to put it to use for the tabernacle?
- 3) The people are warned not to think that it is because of their righteousness that God made it possible for the people of Israel to conquer the other nations. Rather, it is because of the iniquities of the local nations, and the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (9:4-5). What is the significant conclusion that we are supposed to reach regarding our own existence in the land?
- 4) In retelling the events surrounding the Golden Calf episode, Moshe mentions that God was very angry with Aaron (9:20). This detail is missing in the telling of the event in Shemot 32-33. Why do you think that it was not told there, and why is it told now?
- 5) Climate and geography dictate that in Egypt one waters the fields from the river, in Israel it is done by rain (11:10-11). What are the advantages of each system? Is this a warning or a blessing?

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