

PARSHAT EIKEV

August 8, 2020 – 18 Av 5780

Annual: Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25 (Hertz p. 780)

Haftarah: Isaiah 49:14 – 51:3 (Hertz p. 794)

Prepared by Rabbi Joyce Newmark

Torah Portion Summary

Moshe tells the people that if they obey the commandments, God will reward them. With God's help they are to destroy the Canaanite nations, paying particular attention to wiping out all their idols. Moshe calls on the Israelites to remember both the hardships of the wilderness years and how God provided for them. Be very careful, Moshe tells them, that once you enter the good land you do not forget that God is still the source of all you have. Abandoning God's commandments can lead only to tragedy.

Moshe reminds the people that all that God has done and will do for them is not a reward for their virtue and merits. He speaks about the many times when they defied and angered God, most notably the sin of the Golden Calf. Moshe describes how he prayed for mercy for the people, so that God ultimately responded by inscribing a second set of tablets to replace the ones that Moshe shattered. Moshe again charges the Israelites to keep God's commandments and teaches them the second paragraph of the Shema.

I. Give thought to Your servants, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov, and pay no heed to the stubbornness of this people, its wickedness, and its sinfulness. (Devarim 9:27)

1. It is impossible to have righteousness and an upright heart if one is stiff-necked, for he who is stiff-necked follows the stubbornness of his heart and mind, and even though a righteous teacher may demonstrate with clear proof that his thoughts are improper and will lead to loss (he still refuses to listen). This is (due to the fact) that he does not turn (his attention) to the teacher – as though his neck were hard, akin to an iron sinew, in such a manner that he cannot turn (his neck) in any direction – but follows the stubbornness of his heart as before. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
2. Remember our forefathers, who were also stubborn, for had that not been the case they could not have stood against the entire world. Therefore, “pay no heed to the stubbornness of this people,” because it uses this quality for good purposes. (Rabbi Yitzhak Eliyahu Landau, 1801-1876, Lithuania)
3. Of all that the Holy Blessed One created in His world, He did not create a single thing in vain. (Shabbat 77b)
4. Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish said: Whoever shows himself merciful in circumstances when he should be cruel, in the end becomes cruel when he should be merciful. (Kohelet Rabbah 7:16)

Sparks for Discussion

Sforno provides an excellent explanation of why the “stiff-necked” Israelites angered God over and over again. But Rabbi Landau argues that stubbornness is sometimes a virtue. Do you think that there are traits and behaviors that are always good or always bad? Which ones? If God created nothing in vain, what is the purpose of negative traits? What are the dangers of positive traits? How would you explain Rabbi Shimon ben Lakish's teaching?

II. Thereupon the Lord said to Me, “Carve out [*p'sal l'kha*, carve for yourself] two tablets of stone like the first, and come up to Me on the mountain; and make an ark of wood. (Devarim 10:1)

1. With the tablets, the Torah says, “Carve for yourself,” whereas in regard to idolatry it says (5:8), “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image [*lo ta'aseh l'kha feseh*]. This teaches us that all of man's actions must be for the sake of heaven. If you – your bodily pleasure – comes first, that is

idolatry, as in “You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image.” However, when you take second place and the main thing is serving God, “Carve for yourself,” that yields the tablets of the covenant. (Rabbi Yisrael of Rozhin, cited in *Itturei Torah*, Rabbi Aharon Yaakov Greenberg)

2. Two men are traveling through the desert, and one of them has a flask of water. If both of them drink, they will die. But if one drinks, he will be able to reach civilization. Ben Petura taught that they should both drink and die, rather than have one witness the death of his companion. Until Rabbi Akiva came and taught: “It is written: ‘That your brother may live with you.’ This means that your life comes before the life of your fellow man.” (Talmud Bava Metzia 62a)
3. A man came to Rava and said to him, “The governor of my town has ordered me to kill a certain man. And if I don’t do as he says, he will have me killed. What shall I do?” Rava answered him, “Let him kill you rather than commit murder yourself. How do you know that your blood is redder than his? Perhaps his blood is redder.” (Talmud Sanhedrin 74a)
4. Note: On May 21, 2009, Ruth Messinger, president of the American Jewish World Service, gave the commencement address at the Jewish Theological Seminary. This next long section is taken from editor Andrew Silow-Carroll’s reaction in the pages of the *New Jersey Jewish News*.)

In May 2009, Ruth Messinger, the president of the American Jewish World Service, the group that does peace-corps-like humanitarian work throughout the Third World, threw a log onto a burning debate about Jewish priorities. Should Jewish philanthropy and service focus narrowly on the needs of the Jewish people, she asked, or be devoted to *tikun olam* — the pursuit of universal social justice?

The unmistakable thrust of Messinger’s commencement address was that the identity struggles and financial challenges within the Jewish community pale next to the poverty and degradation felt in places like the Congo and Zimbabwe. Messinger was proposing nothing less than “what it means to be Jewish in the 21st century.” As I understand her speech, that means an almost exclusive obligation to “work for greater equity, for social justice, and for global citizenship.” As opposed to what, you’re wondering? Consider the mission statement of United Jewish Communities, the network of federations: “improving the quality of Jewish life worldwide, nurturing Jewish learning, caring for those in need, rescuing Jews in danger, and ensuring the continuity of our people.”... But even I, someone who thinks the case for Jewish “peoplehood” is often overstated and overly nostalgic, felt Messinger had taken the universal argument too far. She’s right in this regard: Engagement with the wider world and a commitment to social justice is a Jewish (and human) moral imperative, as well as good PR for the Jewish people and a way to engage those for whom particularist Jewish causes seem either narrow or irrelevant. And Messinger is right to be worried that in an era of economic triage, Jewish leaders will retreat from being a “light unto the nations.” And yet our impulse to engage the wider world develops within the bosom of family. In that sense, “tribal identity” is not an obstacle to the pursuit of global justice, but a prerequisite. JTS and other institutions fail if they do not teach Judaism as a spur to action. But they also fail if they don’t nurture the Jewish language, behaviors, and mutual responsibility — all elements of peoplehood — in which a commitment to social justice can take root. (Andrew Silow-Carroll, Editor in Chief, *New Jersey Jewish News*, June 4, 2009)

5. [Hillel taught]: If I am not for me, who will be? If I am for myself alone, what am I? And if not now, when? (Avot 1:14)

Sparks for Discussion

Rabbi Yisrael of Rozhin points out the dangers of putting ourselves first when it comes to serving God, but what about other people? What can we learn from the passage from Bava Metzia? What about the one from Sanhedrin? Do these two teachings contradict each other? Why? How do these lessons apply to putting our own community (the Jewish people) first? How would you answer the question of whether Jewish philanthropy and service should focus narrowly on the needs of the Jewish people, or be devoted to *tikun olam* — the pursuit of universal social justice?