**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT EKEV**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Eikev beings with the promise of great reward “as a result of your obeying all these statutes…” Rashi, in his famous opening comments to this *parasha*, cites the *Midrash Tanchuma* as noting the significance of the Torah’s use of the word “*eikev*” (“as a result of”) in this verse. This word literally means “heel,” and is occasionally used in reference to a result, which follows “on the heels” of some action or event. However, the Midrash comments that the word “*eikev*” in this context also serves as a veiled reference to, in Rashi’s words, “the ‘light’ *mitzvot* which a person treads upon with his heels.” According to the Midrash, the rewards promised in this section are granted specifically for our meticulous observance of commands which people often neglect, whose worth is commonly undervalued.

Rav Aharon of Karlin (in *Beit Aharon*) adds a further dimension to this Midrashic reading of the word “*eikev*,” suggesting that it alludes to the need to bring meaning and sanctity to everything in our lives, even to that upon which we “tread with our heels.” We have a tendency to compartmentalize our lives, reserving religious devotion to certain areas of lives, and assuming that other areas are excluded from the religious experience. Rav Aharon of Karlin cites in this context King David’s pronouncement in Tehillim (119:53), “*Chishavti derakhai*” – “I have calculated my paths,” and explains this to mean that King David thought of ways to “elevate” all his “paths,” even his simplest and most mundane affairs. He discovered how each and every “path” he took in life, any activity he found himself involved in, offered an opportunity to achieve something meaningful. Rav Aharon of Karlin writes further that Yaakov’s famous vision of a ladder stationed on the ground and extending to the heavens symbolizes how every place and every experience in life presents us with a “ladder” to the “heavens” – with some significant opportunity for spiritual achievement. And thus the Midrash here in Parashat Eikev speaks of that which people “tread” upon with their “heels,” urging us to never underestimate the value of any situation or experience in life. Wherever we find ourselves, we have an opportunity to achieve something meaningful, and we must look for that opportunity in each circumstance and make an effort to seize it.

Sunday

Addressing *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Eikev, Moshe seeks to allay the fears they may have had in anticipation of the battles against the Canaanite nations which they would have to wage after crossing into the Land of Israel. He says, “Lest you say in your heart: ‘These nations are more numerous than me, so how I can I dispossess them?’ – you must remember that which the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt” (7:17-18). Moshe assures *Benei Yisrael* that just as God miraculously brought them out of Egypt, visiting supernatural plagues upon their oppressors, He would likewise grant them His miraculous assistance in triumphing over the large, powerful armies in Canaan.

Rav Yechezkel of Shinova, in *Divrei Yechezkel*, applies Moshe’s reassurance also to the spiritual battles which we wage on an ongoing basis. (The *Divrei Yechezkel* speaks specifically of the challenge of distracting thoughts during prayer, but it is relevant also to all spiritual challenges.) As we strive for spiritual greatness, we might find ourselves crying in despair, “These nations are more numerous than me – how can I dispossess them?!” The obstacles that stand in our way and which we must overcome in our desire to properly serve God are numerous and formidable. It is understandable that we might begin to wonder whether we can surmount them all, whether spiritual excellence is possible. The response to such fears is, “You must remember that which the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt.” During the years of bondage in Egypt, *Benei Yisrael* were steeped in Egyptian paganism, and deeply entrenched in Egyptian culture. Kabbalistic teaching famously speaks of *Benei Yisrael* at this time falling to the “49th gate of impurity,” one level before the “50th gate” from which they would have been unable to recover. Just as God rescued *Benei Yisrael* from the spiritual abyss and helped prepare them to behold the Revelation at Sinai just seven weeks later, so is He prepared to assist all of us in our spiritual struggles. We should never despair when we find Torah observance challenging, because the precedent of the Exodus shows us that difficult, seemingly insurmountable spiritual challenges can be overcome.

People mistakenly feel that spiritual success is a clearly-paved road, and if they find themselves encountering obstacles which they feel unable to overcome, then their religious devotion must be deficient. The *Divrei Yechezkel* here dispels this misconception, affirming that indeed, “these nations are more numerous than me” – many difficult challenges arise over the course of religious life. Like *Benei Yisrael* preparing to wage war against the powerful armies of Canaan, we are to meet these challenges with confidence and resolve, doing what we can and beseeching God to assist us in achieving what we feel we cannot.

Monday

Parashat Eikev begins with Moshe’s promise to *Benei Yisrael* that God would bestow upon them great blessing in reward for their faithful observance of His commands. One of the rewards mentioned in these verses is, “*Lo yiheyeh vekha akar va-akara u-vi-vhemtekha*” – “There will be no sterile man or sterile woman among you, or among your animals” (7:14).

We might wonder, at first glance, what this promise adds to the promise in the preceding verse, which blesses the nation with fertility: “He [God] will love you, bless you and make you numerous; and He will bless the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, your grain, your wine and your oil, the issue of your herds…” Once the blessing of reproduction of both people and animals is already mentioned, why did Moshe then add the promise that there would be no infertility among *Benei Yisrael*’s people or cattle?

This question likely forms the textual basis for the Gemara’s reading of this verse in Masekhet Bekhorot (44b). The Gemara there interprets the words “*akar*” and “*akara*” (“sterile man” and “sterile woman”) as referring not to biological sterility, but rather to “sterility” in the sense of not producing students, and not producing effects through prayer. According to the Gemara’s reading, the Torah here promises the reward of not biological reproduction – which, as mentioned, appears in the previous verse – but rather the productive teaching and productive prayer.

Rav Zalman Sorotzkin, in his *Oznayim La-Torah*, offers a different explanation of this verse. He writes that the promise of national population growth does not necessarily guarantee the absence of infertility. This promise could be fulfilled by some or most members of the nation producing large families, with some remaining childless. The Torah therefore added that not only would the numbers of *Benei Yisrael* increase, but everybody would contribute to this growth, as there would be no infertility.

The Torah’s vision for *Am Yisrael* is not only one of outstanding national, collective accomplishment, but also that each and every member make his or her contribution. We must never think that we do not need to work to achieve because others are doing so. God wants us to produce as a nation, but He also wants each and every one of us to take part, to play the role we are each capable of playing. We must never resign ourselves to being “infertile,” figuring that we cannot or do not need to produce and make a contribution to our nation or to the world. We must all make an effort, each in his or her own way, to participate in our national effort to spread goodness and sanctity throughout the world, and to make it just a little bit better.

Tuesday

In Moshe’s address to *Benei Yisrael* in Parashat Eikev, he recalls the tragic incident of *cheit ha-eigel* – the sin of the golden calf. He describes how, after descending from Mount Sinai with the two stone tablets given to him by God, he saw the people worshipping the golden calf, whereupon “I took hold of the two tablets and I cast them from my two hands, and I broke them in front of your eyes” (9:17).

The clear implication of this verse is that Moshe made a conscious decision to break the tablets. After all, he speaks of himself here as “taking hold” of the tablets (“*va-etpos*”), implying that he intentionally threw them down. This is also the plain meaning of the original account of *cheit ha-eigel* in Sefer Shemot (32:29), where the Torah tells, “Moshe was angry, and so he cast from his hands the tablets and shattered them beneath the mountain.”

Interestingly, however, the Midrash, in *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* (45; see also *Midrash Tanchuma*, Ki-Tisa, 26), gives a different description of the event:

Moshe took the tablets and was descending, and the text bore itself and Moshe with it. When they saw the drums, dances and [golden] calf, the text fled and flew away from the tablets. They ended up being very heavy for Moshe, and he was unable to bear himself or the tablets, and so he cast them from his hands, and they shattered.

According to this account, the letters of the tablets “flew” away once Moshe saw the people committing the sin of the golden calf. It was the lettering that had “carried” the heavy stones, and without them, the stones became too heavy for Moshe. It thus emerges that Moshe did not, according to this view, throw the tablets, but rather dropped them.

The likely motivation for this surprising opinion is the question of how Moshe could permit himself to shatter the tablets which God had prepared and given him to bring to the people as a sign of the covenant. Although the Gemara (Shabbat 87a) says that God emphatically approved of Moshe’s decision to break the tablets, *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer* seems to have disagreed, and felt that God would not have approved of such an audacious reaction to the people’s sin. It therefore explains that Moshe did not decide to throw the tablets to the ground, but rather dropped them.

The question then becomes how to reconcile this opinion with the Torah’s description of Moshe throwing the tablets, and Moshe’s own account of his “taking hold” of the tablets and casting them to the ground. This question is briefly addressed by the Rashbam, in his commentary to Sefer Shemot (32:19), where he writes, “When he saw the calf, he became weak, and had no strength, and he threw them away from him a bit, so that they would not hurt his feet when they fall.” Like *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, the Rashbam explains that Moshe did not actually decide to break the *luchot*, but rather dropped them because they became too heavy. He writes that the verse speaks of Moshe throwing the tablets because as he dropped them, he sent them in front of him so they would not fall on his feet. According to the Rashbam, Moshe indeed dropped the *luchot*, but he managed to throw them in front of him on their way down to save himself from injury.

The Rashbam does not elaborate on why Moshe suddenly felt “weak,” but we may assume that he refers to the disappointment he experienced upon seeing how far *Benei Yisrael* had fallen. Moshe’s enthusiasm, recognizing the singular importance of this moment, when he brings the people the symbol of their newly-forged covenant with God, had fueled his energy and strength, enabling him to carry the heavy stone tablets. But once he saw what had become of the people, his enthusiasm and determination were instantly replaced by frustration and angst. He was then no longer able to carry the weight of the tablets, and he dropped them. Quite possibly, this is *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*’s intent, as well, in describing the letters “flying” from the stone. Perhaps, this does not mean that the stones actually became heavier, but rather that Moshe’s excitement over the significance of the message engraved on the tablets disappeared upon seeing the people’s conduct, and so the stones became too heavy to handle. His disappointment compromised his strength, and so he dropped the tablets.

If so, then the Midrash here conveys the message that passion and determination expand our capabilities. Heavy burdens become manageable when we are fueled by energy and enthusiasm. If we are determined to achieve the end goal, we are far better equipped to overcome the challenges that need to be overcome to get there. Setbacks can deflate us and compromise our determination, and when this happens, the task seems too “heavy,” too difficult for us to handle. If we maintain our zeal and enthusiasm even in the face of disappointment, we will find ourselves capable of achieving more ambitious goals than we might otherwise think.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the verse in Parashat Eikev (9:17) in which Moshe describes his shattering of the *luchot* (stone tablets) that he had received from God, in reaction to seeing *Benei Yisrael* worship the golden calf. He says: “I took hold of the two tablets and I cast them from my two hands, and I broke them in front of your eyes.”

The question arises as to the meaning of the word “*va-etpos*” (“I took hold,” or “I grabbed”) in this verse. Moshe was, quite obviously, already holding the tablets as he made his way down the mountain. What, then, does he mean when he speaks of himself “taking hold” of the tablets before throwing them down?

One answer, perhaps, emerges from the approach taken by the Rashbam (to Shemot 32:29) in explaining the shattering of the tablets. As we discussed yesterday, the Rashbam maintained that Moshe did not actually intend to break the tablets, but upon seeing the nation in their disgrace, he became frail, and could no longer carry the *luchot*, which fell from his arms. The Torah describes Moshe as “throwing” the tablets, the Rashbam explains, because Moshe managed to throw them forward as they slipped from his hands, in order to protect his feet. (As we discussed, the Rashbam’s approach is based partially on *Pirkei De-Rabbi Eliezer*, 45.) According to this explanation, we could perhaps suggest that “*va-etpos*” refers to Moshe’s successfully “grabbing” onto the tablets as they fell from his hands so he could send them in front of him, such that they would not fall on his feet.

Regardless, a number of other explanations have been offered, following the conventional understanding, that Moshe consciously shattered the *luchot*. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch, in his Torah commentary, explains by noting that two verses earlier, Moshe says that he came down from atop Mount Sinai with the stone tablets “***al*** *shetei yadai*” – “**on** my two hands.” Moshe speaks of himself as having been completely passive with respect to the tablets. He was not actually holding them; it was as though they rested on his hands as he descended from the mountaintop. His role with regard to the *luchot* was merely as a conduit, delivering them to the people. It was only upon seeing the worship of the golden calf that he took an active role, intervening in, and in fact disrupting, the process of transmission by taking hold of the *luchot* and shattering them.

This question is addressed also by Rav Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenberg, in his *Ha-ketav Ve-ha-kabbala*. He cites the account in *Avot De-Rabbi Natan* (chapter 2) that upon seeing the golden calf, Moshe started retreating, moving away from the people. The nation’s elders ran after him and took hold of the tablets, but Moshe overpowered them and wrested the tablets from their hands. He then threw them to the ground. According to this account, he word “*va-etpos*” refers to Moshe’s grabbing the *luchot* from the elders who had seized them from him.

Rav Mecklenberg then cites another theory claiming that after God had informed Moshe of the nation’s worship of the golden calf, before he started coming down the mountain, Moshe initially put down the tablets, intending to leave them at the mountaintop. He figured that since the people did not deserve the tablets, the symbol of their special covenant with God, there was no purpose in bringing them down to the nation. But he then decided it would be preferable to bring the tablets and then shatter them in view of the people, to show them that they forfeited their special relationship with the Almighty as a result of their sin. Thus, Moshe says that he “took hold” of the tablets which he had previously put down on the ground on the mountaintop. (The difficulty with this explanation is that Moshe speaks of himself “taking hold” of the tablets only after he came down the mountain and saw the people worshipping the calf.)

Rav Mecklenberg then offers his own, particularly novel, explanation of this verse. He cites a verse in Mishlei (30:9) in which King Shlomo expresses his fear that if he would become poor, he might then steal, and thus “*tafasti shem Elokai*” – he would be defiling the Name of God. The root *t.f.s.* can thus denote not merely “grab,” but also “defile.” Rav Mecklenberg proceeds to present a creative explanation for the connection between these two meanings, suggesting that one “defiles” by seizing control over something which he should not be controlling. Regardless, the verse in Mishlei provides us with a prooftext establishing that *t.f.s.* can refer to defilement, thus allowing for a new reading of the word “*va-etpos*” in Moshe’s description of his shattering of the *luchot*. Moshe was emphasizing to the people that because of the gravity of their sin, he made the decision to “defile” the *luchot*, to shatter the sacred stones, in order to show the people that they had become unworthy of the covenant that they had forged with the Almighty.

Thursday

In Yeshayahu’s prophecy of consolation read as the *haftara* for Parashat Eikev, he calls upon us to reflect on the lives of Avraham and Sara: “Look back to Avraham, your father, and to Sara who brought you forth, for he was the only one I called, and I blessed him and made him numerous” (Yeshayahu 51:2). Why does the prophet want us to “look back” at Avraham and Sara? How does their story relate to the message of comfort and encouragement in this prophecy?

Rashi explains this verse to mean that just as God blessed Avraham because of his singular status (“he was the only one I called”), so does God promise to bless *Am Yisrael* because of their singular status. God forged a unique relationship with Avraham, and as part of this relationship, He granted him special blessings. In this prophecy, God reassures the people that despite the calamities and upheavals which they have endured, God still maintains His special bond with them, and will bestow upon them great blessings just as He bestowed great blessings upon their ancestor.

*Metzudat David* offers a different explanation, interpreting this verse as referring to the loneliness and vulnerability which we experience as a small nation. Avraham was all alone in his belief in God, without any support from family or peers, but he received God’s support and assistance. Likewise, the prophet assures us that although we are a very small minority, and we often find ourselves alone, without the support of other peoples, we can place our trust in God’s assistance, just as He assisted Avraham in his struggle against a world dominated by paganism.

The Radak, citing his father, explains this verse as introducing the subsequent verse, in which the prophet famously proclaims, “For the Lord has comforted Zion; He has comforted all her ruins. He has made her desert like Eden, and her wasteland like the garden of the Lord…” Avraham and Sara were, for many years, “only one” – alone, without offspring, even in old age. It appeared as though they could never bear children together, and yet, “I blessed him and made him numerous” – they eventually produced a large nation. This is God’s message to *Benei Yisrael* as their land lay in ruins, having become a desolate wasteland after centuries of exile. Just as God produced a large nation from Avraham and Sara when this seemed impossible, so would He produce “Eden” from the desert of Zion. It might seem that *Am Yisrael* would never again return to its homeland, and that its homeland would never again blossom into a flourishing country, but God assured them that this would happen – just as a large nation emerged from Avraham and Sara after it had seemed impossible for them to reproduce.

Our generation has witnessed the miraculous fulfillment of this promise, as Zion once again blossoms and flourishes. The miracle of the Land of Israel’s transformation from an empty wasteland into “Eden” should assure us of God’s ability to transform any situation from crisis to jubilation, that even circumstances which seem hopeless can be resolved and turned into joyous occasions. Having seen how God can turn a desert into “the garden of the Lord,” we can appeal to God and plead that He turn any “desert” we ever face into a “garden” of success, happiness and good fortune.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the conclusion to the section from Sefer Yeshayahu (51:3) read as the *haftara* for Parashat Eikev: “For the Lord has comforted Zion; He has comforted all her ruins. He has made her desert like Eden, and her wasteland like the garden of the Lord…” The prophet here employs two different analogies to describe the Land of Israel’s condition during the Jewish Nation’s exile: “*midbar*” (“desert”) and “*arava*” (“wasteland”). In this verse, we are promised that the “*midbar*” will be transformed into “Eden,” and that the “*arava*” will be transformed into “*gan Hashem*” – “the garden of the Lord.”

Malbim suggests that “*midbar*” and “*arava*” refer to two different kinds of desolate regions. The term “*midbar*,” Malbim writes, is simply an uninhabited area, a place without people. An “*arava*,” by contrast, is an area with unattractive vegetation, such as thistles and cactuses, often found within a *midbar*. These two analogies, Malbim explains, address two different concerns that *Am Yisrael* have in their state of exile. The first is the land’s state of desolation, its being unpopulated and uninhabited. The prophet assures us that the “*midbar*” will blossom and become suitable for successful habitation like Eden. The second concern is that even in the populated regions, the people living there are evil and sinful. The prophet addresses this concern by promising that the “*arava*” – the areas with “thorns,” with sinful people, will be transformed into “the garden of the Lord,” a garden with beautiful, appealing vegetation – meaning, it will eventually be populated by righteous people.

On this basis, Malbim suggests explaining the previous verse, in which (as we discussed yesterday) the prophet urges us to contemplate the examples of our forebears, Avraham and Sara. According to Malbim, this call to reflect upon these two figures corresponds to the two promises of this prophecy – the blossoming of the desert, and the change in the people. Sara’s conception at the age of 90, after decades of infertility, symbolizes the promise of the rebirth and renewal of the Land of Israel after many years of desolation. And the change wrought by Avraham, who arose as a lone monotheist in a pagan world and succeeded in disseminating the belief in the one, true God, symbolizes the eventual change in the faith and conduct of people. The redemption foreseen by the prophet involves both the revival of the Land of Israel, as well as the spiritual revival of the Nation of Israel. We long for not only the time when the land blossoms, but also the time when our people blossom, when *Am Yisrael* becomes worthy of its status as God’s beloved nation and of its mission to represent Him to all mankind.

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