

And What does “and” mean?

Parashat Eikev

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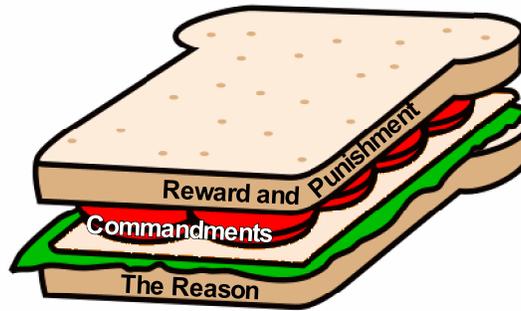
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Today’s parashah, *Eikev*, is the third in the book of *Devarim*, and it begins a new part of the book. In the first two parshiot, *Devarim* and *Va’etchanan*, Moses recounted to the Israelites all that has happened to them—and to himself—in the almost forty years in the desert since they left Egypt. Last week we read his repetition of the Ten Commandments, with some slight modifications from the original version in Exodus, and also the *Shema*, which has become *the* central prayer in Jewish liturgy.

In parashat *Eikev*, while there is a brief section where Moses adds to his account of the happenings of the past forty years, most of this parashah, as well as next week’s parashah, *Re’eh*, is a string of admonitions, the theme of which can be summed up in eight words: *Follow rules, get rewarded; disobey rules, get punished*. The text is mostly an elaboration on this straightforward theme. In *Eikev* this week we are simply told to obey and what the consequences will be for either obedience or disobedience, while in *Re’eh* next Shabbat this is presented as a choice for us to make, a choice between blessing and curse, between life and death, and we are encouraged of course to choose life.

Within the series of admonitions comes a very familiar text. It’s known as the *V’haya im shamo’a*, and it has found its way into our liturgy as the second of the three paragraphs of the *Shema*. Of note is that while we often recite or chant the first and third paragraphs out loud, we always recite this paragraph silently. It lists several commandments, nearly identical to those in the first paragraph of the *Shema* (sometimes referred to as the *Shema-V’ahavta*). In both locations, all of those commanded activities—loving Hashem, saying the words of the *Shema*, teaching them to your children, at home and away from home, day and night, binding them on your arm and forehead, and writing them on our doorposts—are meant as ways to remind ourselves of the rest of Hashem’s rules. It is for this reason, I believe, that the Rabbis juxtaposed these texts in our siddur, to reiterate and reinforce these commandments. But unlike the *Shema-V’ahavta*, the *V’haya im shamo’a* sandwiches these commandments between two texts which fulfill this week’s theme of reward and punishment.

I have a little cartoon here of my “Eikev sandwich.” The commandments which make up the contents—the lettuce, cheese, and tomato in this image—are the same as those in the first paragraph of the *Shema*. The top slice of bread, if you will, is the admonition, the reward for obedience and the dire consequences of disobedience. And the bottom slice represents the reason. (The first paragraph, by contrast, made up of only the lettuce, tomato, and cheese, might be considered a salad.)



The top slice of the textual sandwich fascinates me for a linguistic reason. And that is the use of the Hebrew letter *vav* to connect the various phrases in the text. Now we all know that in its simplest usage, putting a *vav* at the beginning of a Hebrew word generally gets translated as “and.” *Shamayim va’arets*, for instance, means heaven *and* earth. But in other places it can mean so many more things. I’m reminded of the infamous quote by President Clinton, “It depends upon what the meaning of the word ‘is’ is.” In this text, so much depends on what the meaning of the word ‘and’ is. And in this second paragraph of the *Shema*, that *vav* really means “because of the former, this will ensue.”

Let’s look at the text more carefully. I’m going to use my own English translation (slightly abridged), but I’ll begin each section with the Hebrew words, each beginning with the letter *vav*:

וְהָיָה If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you today...

וְנָתַתִּי I will grant rain in your land in season.

וְאָסַפְתָּ You shall gather in your grain and wine and oil.

וְנָתַתִּי I will also provide grass in your fields for your cattle.

וְאָכַלְתָּ You shall eat.

וְשָׂבַעְתָּ You shall be satisfied.

Notice that this is not just a set of events, but that every line is a direct consequence of the line above it. Obeying Hashem’s commandments will lead to His granting the rains at the right time of year, and *that* will cause the crops to flourish, and the grass to grow, so the cattle will thrive. And *that* will lead to people having plenty of food, and *that* in turn will leave people satisfied. The *vav* in each case is not just a simple “and;” it’s a whole phrase, “because of *that*, *this* will occur.”

Throughout Deuteronomy the reward for good comes first, but inevitably after the promise of reward for obedience immediately comes the corresponding promise of punishment for disobedience, and such is the case:

Take heed, lest your hearts be deceived

וּסְרַתְּם And you turn away

וְעַבַּדְתֶּם And you worship other gods

והשתחויתם And you bow down to them.

וחרה Then Hashem will be angry with you

ועצר And He will shut off the skies

ולא So that there will be no rain

והאדמה And the land will not yield its produce

ואברתם And you will soon disappear from the good land

Again each phrase is not a random happening, but rather is subordinate to the phrase before it. Deceiving your hearts will lead to turning away from Hashem, which will in turn lead you to worship false gods, and that will lead to bowing to them. This will in turn make Hashem angry, and because of that anger he will shut off the skies, so of course there will be no rain, and without rain of course there will be no crops, and without crops the people will perish.

What we have here is the Tanach's enunciation of what we might call the domino theory of morality: first of all, obey, and then good things will ensue in proper course. On the other hand, do one thing wrong and you will inevitably slide down the slippery slope of events to perdition—so don't even think about taking that first step.

The paragraph then continues with a near exact repetition of the commandments of the first paragraph of the *Shema*: love Hashem; keep these words in your hearts; bind them on your arms and foreheads; teach them to your children, home and abroad, night and day; and write them on your doorposts and gates. But notice that there are two differences between the commandments here and those in the *Shema-V'ahavta*. First of all, most of these are commanded in the plural, rather than in the singular as in the *V'ahavta*. The tefillin should go not *al yadecha* and *bayn aynecha* but rather *al yed'chem* and *bayn aynaychem*.

Second, a reason is appended to the paragraph, that bottom slice of our text sandwich: "so that both you and your children may endure in the Promised Land, forever."

These two differences are rationally connected. We all know and recognize—even those in Biblical times knew—that individual reward and punishment does not hold in this world; too often good people suffer and the wicked flourish. But when the commandments are worded in the plural, we can accept more readily that communities and societies based on justice and a strong moral code are more likely to thrive, while those not so grounded are at risk for degeneracy.

I should point out—but I won't further elaborate on the fact—that the *V'haya im shamo'a* is not included in the Reform siddur as part of the *Shema*, nor is most of the third paragraph, the *Vayomer*. It is included in the Reconstructionist siddur, but it is one of three optional choices, and interestingly the two alternative texts also come from this part of the book of *Devarim*.

Before we conclude this Shabbat, I would like to make a brief comment on the haftarah as well. Today we read what is referred to as the "Second haftarah of Consolation." To briefly review, there were three haftarot of Admonition in the weeks before Tisha B'Av, and last week, immediately following Tisha B'Av, we read the first haftarah of

Consolation. It turns out that there are seven of them in total, taking us up to the last Shabbat before Rosh Hashanah. All of them are from the prophet Isaiah, and I'm struck by the coincidence that the East Coast was visited this particular week by Hurricane Isaias. But be that as it may. My question is: why seven such haftarot? In fact, why even two? This question bothered me for decades. Okay, there's Tisha B'Av, which is really sad, and then we have Shabbat *Nachamu*, which was last Shabbat, where we say, "Be comforted." Say it once, shouldn't that be enough already?

My mother died in 2002, and my father followed in the summer of 2004. It's hard now to believe it was that long ago. Of course we had the funeral, then shiva, and *shloshim* that year ended about the time of Tisha B'Av. And it then occurred to me, in my own mourning process: consolation is not a one-time event, it's a long process, and to really be consoled for your loss requires ongoing comfort and support from family and from community, as well as in our ritual practice. And so it is with consolation for our people for the many losses associated with Tisha B'Av. I have come to understand that repeating seven *shabbatot* with Isaiah's moving, lyrical poetry is just about right, to take us up to the fresh start represented by Rosh Hashanah. Whatever our individual losses may be, whenever they may have occurred, may we all continue in the ever ongoing process of consolation, to new beginnings.

Shabbat Shalom!