

Today's Torah reading begins "And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, [*Ekev* – then, as a consequence] the Lord your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers."¹

The word *Ekev* that names this week's Torah reading has the same root as *Ya'akov* (Jacob). Recall Jacob was born grasping the heel of his elder twin Esau, and therefore was named for the heel². *Ekev* is idiomatically translated as "on the heel of," "because," "as a consequence of," or "in the end."

Rashi takes *Ekev* as a warning against ignoring the *mitzvot* that one might consider unimportant and therefore grind under the heel, as we might treat refuse. Thus we have, in *Pirkei Avot*³, the teaching of Rabbi Yehudah haNasi to perform a "minor mitzvah" as eagerly as a "major" one, because we don't really know how to evaluate our deeds.

Midrash is a term applied to many of the ancient commentaries on our sacred texts. *Midrash* – from *d'rash* – to seek out and investigate, hence to study and understand fully – often explains a text by relating it to another text, often by noting a similarity or contrast between the two texts in wording (Rabbi Ishmael's second rule of textual interpretation, cited in our siddur on p. 70)⁴ or in content. Even if you're not a diligent student of Torah, you may recognize this technique as a model for *hyperlinks* that drive much modern computer software, including the World Wide Web.

There are wonderful lessons in the *Midrash* on *parashat Ekev* that likely would never occur to a casual reader of Torah.

An example from perhaps the best known collection of *midrashim*, the *Midrash Rabbah*:

... [*Said God to Israel*]: 'You might perhaps think [because of its restrictions] that I have given you the Sabbath to your disadvantage; I have surely given the Sabbath to you only for your own advantage.'

How? The Midrash continues:

R. Hiyya b. Abba said: [God said to Israel]: 'You sanctify the Sabbath with food and drink and clean clothes, deriving physical enjoyment therefrom, while I give you reward.'

We should remind ourselves that we live in a time of historically unprecedented affluence. Most of us are fortunate enough to take for granted high quality food daily, and that every day we will have clean garments. But it is still a common practice to set aside special foods and clothing for Shabbat.

The Midrash proceeds to quote Isaiah⁵: ... *call the Sabbath a delight Then shall you delight in the Lord.* The Midrash continues:

¹ *Etz Hayim*, p. 1037, v. 12

² *Etz Hayim*, p. 147, v. 26

³ *Pirkei Avot*, chapter 2, verse 1 – see *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, p. 260

⁴ *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*

⁵ Isaiah 58:13-14. These verses are read in the haftara for the morning of Yom Kippur.

*That is to say, He will grant you the desires of your heart. Israel asked God: 'When will You grant us the reward of the mitzvot that we observe?' God replied: 'As for the mitzvot that you observe, you eat of their fruits now, but their full reward I shall give you in the end' [after death – in the world to come]. This follows from "And it shall come to pass, because [ekev] you hearken...."*⁶

Another example: Beginning at p. 1043 of the *Etz Hayim*, Moses recalls the incident of the Golden Calf, God's threat to destroy Israel, and Moses' successful plea for mercy. The Midrash depicts Moses as recalling Abraham's request to spare the sinners of Sodom and Gomorrah if 10 righteous individuals existed in those cities, and saying he can find 80 righteous among Israel. God tells him to go ahead. Illustrating that time does not always move forward in *Tanach* or Midrash - either some of the events that justified labeling individuals as righteous hadn't yet occurred, or the incident of the Golden Calf is chronologically out of order in the Torah - Moses cites the 70 elders appointed to help him judge the people; Aaron and his four sons (Nadav, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar); Aaron's grandson, Pinchas; and Caleb, the righteous "spy." Modestly omitting himself and his assistant, Joshua, Moses finds himself stuck at a count of 77. The Midrash continues:

He then exclaimed: 'Master of the Universe, if these [righteous] men though alive cannot stand for them [Israel] ..., then let the dead do so.... Do it for the merit of the three Patriarchs ... then there will be 80,' [as the Torah says⁷] 'Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants.' ... immediately, God replied: 'I have pardoned according to your word.' [Num.14:20]....

The Midrash continues by using this to explain a statement in *Kohellet*:

When at a later date Solomon⁸... saw that though Moses had mentioned 77 living righteous men it would have been of no avail had he not also mentioned the merits of the three dead Patriarchs, he said: 'Wherefore I praised the dead that are already dead more than the living that are yet alive; but better than they both is he that has not yet been, who has not seen the evil work that is done under the sun.' [Eccl. 4:2-3]⁹

I'd like to illustrate how I understand a Midrash might be constructed with an example, using both similarity of wording and similarity of content. The following may not be original – if it's any good, it was probably written by one of our sages – but I don't recall reading or hearing it.

Another exhortation to recall the Patriarch Abraham is in today's haftara: on p. 1059 of the *Etz Hayim*, Isaiah 51:1-2: "Listen to Me, you who pursue justice Look back to Abraham your father...." The words translated as "pursue justice" have the same roots as those in the famous injunction "Justice, justice shall you pursue¹⁰," where the repetition of "justice" means we should pursue justice justly, thereby moderating the zeal implied by "pursue." How did Abraham pursue "justice" for the residents of Sodom

⁶ Excerpted from *Midrash Rabbah* on Deuteronomy; Chapter III, section 1

⁷ Ex. 32:13 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 533

⁸ Traditionally considered the author of *Kohélet* (*Ecclesiastes*), although modern scholarship concludes he wasn't

⁹ *Midrash Rabbah* on Deuteronomy, ch. III, section 15

¹⁰ Deut. 16:20 - *Etz Hayim*, p. 1088

and Gomorrah? Recall he advocated that if 10 righteous residents existed, then the cities – not just the righteous, but the entire cities, including the guilty - should be spared. So Abraham showed zeal in his advocacy, and God moderated His extreme plan in agreeing to Abraham’s proposal. They showed that *tzedek* – justice, and the root of *tzedakah*, charity – can mean extending a charitable judgment to those deserving of strict justice.

Now, one might question if God really showed moderation in this incident – after all, 10 righteous were not found in Sodom and Gomorrah, and the cities were destroyed. But the Torah has another incident in which God showed moderation by not enforcing the full punishment of the law. According to Torah law, those suffering certain skin afflictions were to be quarantined for a week, 2 weeks, or more (Lev. 13 – *Etz Hayim*, pp. 651 ff). But when Miriam was divinely skin-afflicted for speaking against Moses¹¹, God required only a one-week quarantine, teaching us that even when we are fully backed by the law in a dispute, we should not seek to impose the maximum punishment or obtain the maximum settlement; accepting less than the maximum leaves *Ekev* the other party with a bit more dignity and a bit less humiliation, and helps restore peace in the community.

¹¹ Num. 12 - *Etz Hayim*, pp. 833-835. See especially verses 14-15, p. 835.