

Sat 19 Aug 1995

Ekev

Congregation Adat Reyim

Robert Berkowitz

Ekev

Good morning. Today's Torah reading is Parsha Ekev which consists of Deut 7:12 through Deut 11:25. Ekev is the 2nd word of the parsha and in context means as a result of or as a consequence.

Ekev continues and completes Moses's second discourse to the people which began with chapter 4 [verse 44]. Ekev opens with Moses describing God's love for his people and how as a consequence for faithfully obeying the rules set out for us, God's blessing will be bestowed. Moses then gives the people a pep talk about the invasion about to be undertaken. For me these paragraphs are difficult passages. Being someone that generally accepts the principle of live and let live, reading Moses's words "destroy all the peoples" and "show no pity", makes me uneasy.

Moses then talks to the people about the wilderness experience that is coming to an end. In particular, he talks about the manna they have eaten for the last 40 years. Moses describes the manna as a test for Israel, a description that has caused controversy. During this oration Moses speaks the well-known verse "...man does not live on bread alone..."¹.

Moses then reinforces earlier statements about The Land being a good land, and that the people once settled there should remember to thank God. In this speech one finds the proof text for saying the Birkat ha-Mazon.

Moses then describes how Israel will be able to dispossess nations greater and more populous on the other side of the Jordan River because "God is crossing at your head"². A Midrash expounds how with this speech and with the speech that follows Moses is subtly attempting to get Israel to intercede with God on his behalf. In the previous parsha, Va'techanan³, Moses made sure the people knew that because of them he was to die without getting to the Promised Land. Now he hinted that as he kept God from destroying Israel, Israel should intercede to persuade God to reverse His judgement concerning Moses. The midrash notes that the people failed him.

Moses then reviews the incident with the golden calf. He retells the story which we had read earlier in Exodus. This time we see the events through Moses' eyes, not via an omniscient narrator.

Moses then raises a key issue. He says: "...what does the Lord your God demand of you, but to fear God ..." ⁴. This statement has been a source of controversy throughout the ages. Why does Moses use the word "but"? It implies that Moses feels that fearing God is not demanding much, that fear of God is a trifling matter. Yet others state that fear of God is a difficult task. Job says: "...the fear of the Lord is wisdom." ⁵ Job is just one of four people in the entire Tanakh called God fearing; Moses is not one of the four ⁶. The Talmud ⁷ declares that everything is in the hands of God except the fear of God. Yosef Albo, a Spanish commentator of the late 14th and early 15th century wrote: "The aim which the soul is capable of attaining while in the body by performing the commandments of the Torah, is nothing else [emphasis added] than the permanent acquisition of a disposition to fear God. And when it acquires this attribute of fearing God, the soul is elevated and is prepared to attain eternal life ..." ⁸.

A few verses later Moses's words create another controversy when he says one is to swear by God's name⁹. The question is: is this a command to swear by God's name or is it permission to swear by God's name? Nehama Leibowitz in her forth commentary on Ekev points out the interpretation depends on the way the Hebrew grammatical structure is broken down; where one feels the commas should be placed so to speak. Maimonides' view is that this is an imperative, Nachmanides disagrees.

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A little later we read verses that have become the 2nd paragraph of the Shema¹⁰. I will return to these words in a moment, after I finish my summary of Ekev.

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The parsha ends with a description of the extent of the Land. Israel is described as going from the wilderness to Lebanon, from the Euphrates to the Mediterranean Sea.

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Let me conclude my D'var Torah with a short discussion of Deut 11:13 - 21, which as I just told you have been incorporated into the traditional Jewish liturgy. The Reform movement recites an edited version of these verses when it recites the Shema.

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The words are problematic for thinking people. Most of the paragraph is devoted to the idea that God will send blessings if the commandments are kept and will withhold blessings if the commandments are ignored. While people would like to feel that the universe is ordered in a just manner, the evidence for that is not very strong. The book of Job, as well as Jeremiah, Habakkuk, Ecclesiastes among others state that things often go well for the wicked and ill for the righteous. How then can this simplistic notion of reward and punishment be spoken by Moses and recited twice daily by the observant Jew?

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The sages propose many solutions to this dilemma. Emotionally it presents one of the strongest arguments for the existence of a hereafter. The moral books may not be balanced in this life, but they will be balanced at the end of days.

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My personal belief, however, is that the concept expressed by Moses in these paragraphs is more true than many people think. When the thoughts expressed are applied to an individual, one immediately runs into the problem stated above. However, Moses is not talking to you or me as one person. Modern English does not syntactically distinguish between 2nd person singular and 2nd person plural -- but Hebrew does. Moses is talking to you all, to society, to the community. I believe that when society acts rightly then its members will be blessed. When the community acts in an evil manner, then its members will a short time later have God's blessings withheld. I look at history and accept that nations and communities are rewarded or punished as a result of their actions. One individual may clear an area of trees, but when a society removes its trees it changes its climate and the rain may not fall. One or two fishermen may capture many cod off Canada's shore, but when fishing nations fish with industrial trawlers and don't leave anything after they arrive, the earth does stops yielding its produce.

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Moses is here speaking in the plural. The words are true.

[not in my talk, added 8/21/95 but Ekev also has 3rd line of Avot "great, mighty, and exalted God"]

END NOTES

¹ Deut 8:3.

² Deut 9:3.

³Deut 4:21 - 22.

⁴ Deut 10:12.

⁵ Job 28:28.

⁶ Abraham [Gen 22:12], Joseph [Gen 42:18], Job [1:1], and Obadiah [I Kings 18:3].

⁷ Berachot 33b.

⁸ Sefer Ha-ikkarim, quoted by Nehama Leibowitz, Studies in Devarim, Chapter Ekev 3.

⁹ Deut 10:20.

¹⁰ Deut 11:13 - 21.

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