

Parashat 'Ekev
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Included in *Parashat Ekev* is the most widely skipped paragraph in Jewish Liturgy: the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*. Finding its place between first and third paragraphs, two popular and routinely sung paragraphs, the second paragraph begins with a liturgical disadvantage. But more than its second-class placement, the message of the second paragraph is one which is easier to skim over rather than consider deeply. The paragraph, Deut. 11: 13 – 17 (pp. 1052 – 1053) presents a theology which is, at first blush, quite difficult for modern readers to accept.

The second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* provides an example of the Biblical notion of “Reward and Punishment”. “Reward and Punishment” is a seemingly binary theology which says, essentially, that God will **reward** you with blessings if you obey God’s laws. If, however, you do not obey, God will **punish** you. This notion is rejected by many modern thinkers on the basis of the fact that, in this world, blessings seem to be enjoyed by lots of people who do not follow God’s laws. We see, as well, that good and observant people suffer pain and trials in life, despite the fact that they may observe God’s laws. The good are punished, the evil are blessed. So it seems that, too often, our experiences and observations challenge the viability of “Reward and Punishment”.

The task I have given to myself today, therefore, is to restore some stature and value to this theology, to raise up the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* to a level of greater importance, and to inspire us to see both relevance and urgency to its message. Let’s turn, therefore, to more that passage, pp. 1052 – 1053.

The first problem we encounter here is bad weather:

If you obey my commandments that I have enjoined upon you this day I will grant the rain for the land in season, the early rain and the late...Take care, however, not to be lured away to other gods...For the Lord’s anger will flare up against you and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain.

Everyone talks about the weather, but no one does anything about it! According to this passage, we can control the weather, in fact we can control God (by requiring God to act), simply by following God’s laws. This is a nice theory, but it doesn’t work well in practice.

I would like to suggest, however, that what we have here may be good theology even if it is bad meteorology. What I mean is this: This paragraph ostensibly suggests how rain can be made to fall. That is silly, and we are not the first or only ones to realize that this is not how the weather is controlled. Why then, if anyone reading this realizes that the world does not conform to this paradigm, why is this here? Why is this paragraph included in the *Sh'ma*? What can we possibly learn from this?

This paragraph, I believe, is intended to teach us one of the most important lessons of religion in general and Judaism in particular. Simply put, the lesson here is that our actions have consequences **and** our actions matter to God.

The Medieval Commentator, known by his pen-name, The Malbim (R. Meir Leibish Weiser, 1809 – 1879) asks an interesting question: If God wanted the Israelites to have fertile land on which to live, why did God not give them the land of Egypt, which was known to have good farming and grazing land? The Malbim answers his own question:

The land of Egypt is irrigated by the Nile once every year whereas Israel is in constant need of rain. But God wanted the Israelites to need rain constantly, as opposed to needing a flooding of the Nile only once each year. Only if you need rain always, do you realize that

”one needs divine mercy at each and every moment”.

We need to remember and realize, each day, that what we do and say will have consequences. If we think this way only once a year, we forget the lesson that how we speak and behave has consequences. Our actions are important. Our deeds have consequences.

In general, you see, we tend to live our lives in a rather self-centered way: I will do what I want, what I feel like doing, what is easiest or best for **me**. And so long as what I doesn't hurt anyone, I continue to act in that manner.

This paragraph from the Torah (the 2nd paragraph of the Sh'ma) comes to inform us that this line of thinking is wrong. What you do matters to God, even if you don't hurt someone. What you say and what you do, have implications. Your actions, no matter what they are, have consequences. You may believe that you can hide behind the actions of others, so that:

If my behavior is bad, all I need to do is to live **near** good people and I'll get rain for my fields because my neighbor happens to be a good guy. It isn't going to rain on his field and not on my fields, which are adjacent to his. Therefore, I can get rain and act with impunity.

If that's what you think, you are wrong. You may in fact be able to hide behind the deeds of another, for a time, but ultimately, your deeds have consequences and those consequences should be considered quite seriously. And I want to emphasize that how we behave is inextricably tied to what we say and how we communicate with others.

This has been a very difficult week in Israel for the Jewish People. Part of the difficulty is reflected in a terrorist attack on a car with three IDF soldiers in it. But this week we must confront as a People several different attacks, attacks and threats not rooted in radical Islam, but Jewish terrorist attacks.

1. A 16 year old girl, Shira Banki, attended a Gay Pride Parade in support of a friend. While there, a knife-wielding Haredi went through the crowd, stabbing at whom ever happened to be nearby. Shira was seriously stabbed. She died this week.
2. A Palestinian toddler, Ali Saad Dwabasha, was killed when a fire bomb was thrown into his house by Jewish vigilantes, terrorists, who burned down the house. When the parents saw the

fire, they grabbed a blanket on the bed where the baby, Ali, had been sleeping. In her haste, however, thinking that the baby was wrapped in the blanket, his mother ran from the house, only to find that the baby was not in her blanket. The baby was still in the house and died this week. (The perpetrator/s are still being sought. There is speculation that this might have been an act of terrorism perpetrated by Jews).

3. This week another group, in response to Palestinian terrorists, criticized Pres. Rivlin for his condemnation of the Jewish terrorist bombing which killed the baby. That Jewish group then turned their wrath on the President and threatened him in a chilling way by comparing him with Nazis and called for his assassination.
4. Finally, death threats were received in Jerusalem at the Jerusalem offices of the NIF. In that message, the caller said, "There isn't a drop of Judaism in you" and, again, suggested that they be killed.

What is disturbing here, beyond the obvious terroristic threats, is that these threats and violent acts are perpetrated by Jews, Jewish terrorists.

I have read this week, in response to these acts, a number of half-hearted and luke-warm apologies from those who support the legitimate groups from which the perpetrators come or may have come:

Yes, the perpetrators are Jewish.

Yes the things stated were disturbing.

Yes this should not have happened.

But they did happen and that was regrettable. Considering this, **however**, in the context of everything that is going on in Israel and the surrounding areas, considering the ongoing threats to Israel's national security, considering the threats internally as cars on the road are routinely attacked, as Arab terrorists attack our citizens, harm and maim our children, **it is hard to get too worked up.**

Moreover, our defenders point out, the apologies and expressions of culpability and shame which the Palestinian leadership **should** express is never forthcoming.

One writer, Palestinian journalist, Bassam Tawil (Gatestone Inst), said the following:

Mahmoud Abbas' ambiguous, half-hearted condemnations of attacks by Palestinians are only meant for public consumption and to appease Western donors...I cannot remember ever hearing Abbas or any Palestinian leader express shock and outrage when a Jew dies as a result of a Palestinian killing a Jew.

The writer continues comparing Jewish and Palestinian responses to terrorism committed by their own:

I cannot count the number of times I have heard from Israeli Jews the phrases: "I am sorry" and "I am ashamed", in response to the horrific crime that claimed the life of the toddler, Ali Dawabsha.

It is true that the Palestinians do not express regret. It is true that their apologies are half-hearted ("half" being generous). But here is the point:

We cannot look to the Palestinians to learn how to behave. We endure the attacks and the terrorism and we try to stop them. We don't look to the Palestinians, who we know either sponsor or turn a blind eye to terrorism, for their support. And we do not look to them to know the difference between right and wrong, good and evil, black and white.

When the Jewish People, or people acting in the name of the Jewish People act in ways that constitute the perpetration of terror, murder, evil, we must respond to that which has been committed in our name. And we must respond, condemn, compensate or due what we can to demonstrate our sincerity **not for the sake of the victims alone. We must respond forcefully, clearly and publicly for us, for the sake of the Jewish People.**

If we were to allow such things to go unnoticed, if we were to turn away, ignore or neglect, we certainly do a disservice to the victim but our lack of forcefulness and indignation at our own People allows a stain to remain within the fabric of the Jewish People. I am concerned about the victims of terror and crime. But I am also concerned that my response, my word, my actions will in some way, explicitly or implicitly, convey that there is a place within Judaism for such a thing.

Those who compare the responses to terrorism of the Jewish People to the response of the Palestinians to terrorism make the point very clearly. They are comparing us to a people whose standards of personal piety, individual responsibility and sense of vigilance for protecting human life is very different from our own. Once we elevate the actions of our enemies to a level that we might use to measure ourselves, we have lost: we have lost the argument and we have diminished the unique holiness of the Jewish People.

We are different than others in our responses to other human beings. We are commanded to behave with a level of care and personal responsibility in a way which cannot be compared to others. When Israel is held to a higher standard we cringe and object. But in the end, we must hold ourselves to a higher standard and if, Gd forbid, we should accept the behavior of others as the level for which we strive, we have ceased being Jewish. Indeed, the State of Israel exists not to be a State for Jews. We are a Jewish State, a state founded on Jewish values, on lofty visions articulated by our prophets, on a notion that our place on earth must be holy.

If perpetrated by Jews, these acts must be condemned, not only because they are wrong, shameful and destructive, but because our actions have implications. God does care how we behave. God does want us to act in ways that inspire others to act in ways that demonstrate holiness and care for other human beings. I believe that the second paragraph of the Sh'ma is, perhaps the most important of the three for, in that paragraph it is clear and unambiguous: If you act as I want you to act you will be blessed. Not blessed by rain in season, but blessed as we demonstrate to ourselves and others that this is how a And when we behave in this way, according to our own, lofty standards, we may not bring universal honor to the Jewish People from those who hate us. We shall however, bring honor and glory to God.