

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

Whenever they stepped out of line in the desert, the punishment was swift and painful. Fire consumed them. The earth swallowed them. Snakes bit them. Illness befell them. As Moses tells them in Devarim 8:5, "Bear in mind that the LORD your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son." But in the Land, just as there will be no obvious and direct miracles, there will be no obvious and direct punishments. And there won't be a leader with singular clear access to God's thoughts and desires who can lay out the right path so clearly.

In the Land, all the Israelites will have to know if God is happy with them is rain - the key to any long-term success. As they are told in Devarim 11:10-12:

For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the LORD your God looks after, on which the LORD your God always keeps His eye, from year's beginning to year's end.

The Land of Israel is special to God because it is rain-land. Faith-land. It has no river like the Nile or the Tigris and Euphrates to power the irrigation necessary for a mass civilization. Those dwelling in the Land of Israel have to put in the work, but it is all for naught if forces beyond their control do not cooperate. And the only hope to influence those forces is to be humble in the face of them, and to appreciate them.

Modern Jewish thinkers have rejected this idea that mitzvah performance can influence the weather. The Reform Movement removed this paragraph from their prayer book many years ago. But I personally find the message both powerful and important. Security and abundance lead to overconfidence in our merit, our skill, and the solidity and reliability of the world around us. And this overconfidence can quickly lead to arrogance, callousness, and eventually cruelty. So much of the good in our lives is on account of people being more loving, kind, and decent than they have to be. That is God at work. And only by keeping faith with that will we last long on this land.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Ekev

Shabbat Mevarekhim Hahodesh

August 4, 2018 | 23 Av 5778

Annual | Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25 (Etz Hayim p. 1037-1054; Hertz p. 780-793)

Triennial | Deuteronomy 9:4-10:11 (Etz Hayim p. 1042-1048; Hertz p. 784-789)

Haftarah | Isaiah 49:14-51:3 (Etz Hayim p. 1055-1060; Hertz p. 794-798)

D'var Torah: Make it Rain

Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz, Conservative Yeshiva Director of NA Engagement

The most familiar part of Parashat Ekev comes toward the end, in chapter 11, verses 13-14 when Moshe, speaking in God's voice, tells the Israelites: "If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day...I will grant the rain for your land in season." This is, of course, the second paragraph of the Shema, recited twice daily to fulfill the command to recite them when we lie down and rise up, and written on parchment and stuffed into tefillin and mezuzot so that we can fulfill the command to impress them on our hearts, bind them on our hands, let them be symbols on our forehead, and inscribe them on our doorposts.

But what is the larger context here? And why this emphasis on rain?

The Israelites are about to take a major developmental step as they enter the Land. In the desert, God was ever-present and miracles were obvious - whether in defeating enemies or providing manna. In the Land of Israel, the Israelites have to fight their enemies, establish settlements, and work to produce their own food. This is an important step - a good one, one that God desires. But it is fraught with peril. In the desert, Israelite dependence made them faithful - faithful enough to take this next step (unlike their parents who perished in the desert). But in the Land of Israel, with God taking a step back, the Israelites can easily come to the mistaken belief that they are entirely responsible for their success and comfort. And they will break faith with God and Torah.

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D'var Haftarah: An Eternal Promise

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This week's haftarah is the second of seven special haftarot which follow Tisha b'Av. They are known as the Shiva d'Nehamta – the Seven [haftarot] of consolation, and their intention, as the name implies, is to bring solace to a beleaguered nation suffering from the loss of its sacred center and bereft of control over its homeland. Last week's haftarah opened with the words – “Nahamu, nahamu ami – Comfort, O comfort My people” (Isaiah 40:1) – most certainly strong words of support. The opening verse of this week's haftarah is anything but supportive: “Zion says: ‘The Lord has forsaken me; my Lord has forsaken Me.’” (49:14) Although the prophet immediately offers a rejoinder to these words, the impression they leave is still deeply felt.

Centuries later, following the trauma of the destruction of the Second Temple and seemingly endless Roman domination, the rabbinic sages of Eretz Yisrael were also in need of consolation. This verse apparently struck a painful cord in the consciousness of some of them. In a midrash from the land of Israel during the Talmudic period, we see a struggle over how to digest its significance.

The following midrash tries to answer this question: ‘Rabbi Azariah and Rabbi Abahu said in the name of Resh Lakish: You find that when Israel's sins brought about the entry of Israel's enemies to Jerusalem, they took the heroes of Israel and tied their hands behind their backs. The Holy One Blessed be He said: It is written: ‘I will be with him in trouble’, and since My children are in trouble, can I remain at ease? (Psalms 91:15) As it were, God bound His right arm behind His back before the enemy, for as long as My people are enslaved, so am I. When My people are freed so will My right hand be freed.’ (abridged and adapted from Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 17:5, Mandelbaum ed. p. 286-7)

This surprisingly anthropomorphic metaphor is the first response of the midrash to the possibility that God has abandoned His people. It claims that God does not abandon His people, rather He practices “radical” empathy by suffering its suffering and experiencing its helplessness. However, this midrash does not end here. It has a shocking rejoinder to this view: “Rabbi Elazar [taught] in the name of Rabbi Yossi bar Zimra: ‘In the future, a Divine Voice will proclaim on the mountain tops, saying, Sing unto God a new song (Psalms 96:1) ... Said the Holy One Blessed He: In the future, My right hand will perform all of the miracles [necessary for redemption]. Still, Zion will say: ‘The Lord has forsaken Me, the Lord has forgotten me.’ (ibid.)

According to this ending, people will not know how to digest God's redemptive actions. Even when good things happen, past trauma will diminish their ability to acknowledge them. The dialectic expressed in this midrash is very real. On the one hand, it wants us to have a sense that God is with us in our trials and tribulations, suffering along with us. On the other, it wants us to be aware that

God will ultimately end our suffering and redeem us. Sadly, we may not be able to appreciate it, leaving us still questioning God.

Serious religious people live with a certain degree of uncertainty and insecurity. This is inevitable for thinking and feeling people. As the midrash indicates, it is to Judaism's great credit that its sages had a profound awareness of this and did not shy away from expressing it.

Parashat Ekev Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

Moshe continues his review of the national history, stressing the many good qualities of the land that they are about to inherit and warning of what could go wrong if they leave God and the *Mitzvot*.

1) In 7:17 Moshe addresses the people's potential fear in face of entering the land: ‘if you will say in your heart: these nations are more numerous than me, how can I conquer them?’ Why do you think that people will say this ‘in their hearts’? Why might Moshe have decided to address this fear in an open manner? Can you remember another event where fear was the catalyst?

2) God tells us that He tested us for 40 years and made our lives difficult by giving us hunger and giving us the Manna, which neither we nor our forefathers were familiar with (8:3). How is receiving Manna from Heaven a difficulty for people?!

3) We will receive a good land, one in which we can eat, and feel full (not a given everywhere in the world.) Than we will bless God ‘for the land that He gave you’ (8:10). Why do you think that the *Mitzvah* to say *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after the meal) is for the land, not for the food?

4) Moshe retells the events of the Golden Calf, juxtaposing receiving the Tablets with calf and God's anger (9:9-21). However, he does not mention his intercession on behalf of the people even before coming down from the mountain (Ex. 32:7-13). Why do you think that Moshe skips this part?

5) The second part of the Shema is found in 11:13-21. We are warned that if we will follow other gods, the LORD will withhold rain, and eventually we will be gone from the good land He gave us. What follows are the commandments of *Tfillin*, teaching our children God's words, and *Mezuza*. What might be the connection to the situation described just before?

We welcome your comments: torahsparks@uscj.org