

DVAR TORAH – EIKEV

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At this point in the Torah narrative we are still near the beginning of Sefer Devarim, the fifth book of the Torah. Much of Devarim consists of Moshe's discourses to the Hebrews before Moshe dies. While God did provide Moshe a vision of Israel, Moshe was to die in the wilderness, buried in an unknown grave, never to enter the Land of Israel. (Devarim, V'Zot Ha'Bracha 34:4-6).

This parsha is part of Moshe's Second Discourse, which focuses primarily on the religious foundations of the covenant at Sinai. To digress for a moment, the notion of covenants, or agreements, with God is central to Judaism and central to Jewish understanding and interpretation of the Torah. There are three important covenants with God described in the Torah.

First is the covenant with Noach that applies to all mankind, and for that matter all living creatures of any sort. God agrees that there will never be another great flood that destroys the world, symbolized by the rainbow. (Breishit, Noach 9:8-17).

Next is the covenant with Avraham. God promises to make Avraham the father of a multitude of nations and to provide to Avraham and his descendants the land of Canaan. (Breishit, Lech Lecha 17:1-12). This covenant is symbolized to this day by all Jewish men beginning on their 8th day of life.

Finally there is the covenant with Moshe. This is represented by the entire experience of the Revelation at Sinai. In exchange for accepting the Torah, the Hebrews are promised that they will be aided by God and rewarded with what is the land of Israel. (Shemot, Mishpatim 23:20-33). The end result of our bargain with God is that we have the Torah, and the burden and obligation to bring knowledge of God and the universal values of the Torah to the world.

This week is also the Second Week of Consolation, remembering the destruction of the Temple on Tisha B'Av, which was about two weeks ago on the calendar. Moshe's words in Eikev continue to have relevance today, nearly two thousand years after that calamity.

The parsha starts off with Moshe telling us that if we follow "these" teachings of the Torah God will safeguard us and reward us. "God will love you, bless you and multiply you, bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your Land, your grain, your wine and your oil" (Devarim, Eikev, 7:12-13). You get the picture.

Follow *these* rules and God will reward you. To set the stage we need to look back to last week's parsha to understand what rules we are talking about. Well, the passages of Moshe's exhortation that we covered last week were pretty broad. They included The Ten Commandments (Devarim, V'Etchanan 5:6-18), the Shema (in particular the proclamation of God's oneness and the first paragraph calling upon the Hebrews to love God with all their soul and all their might) (Devarim, V'Etchanan 6:4-9) and a discussion of the Exodus and freedom from slavery as an object lesson for humankind (Devarim, V'Etchanan 6:20-25).

In Eikev Moshe is very reflective and very emotional. Let's use the Ten Commandments as an example. Eikev includes Moshe's reflections on being given the two tablets of stone on

which the Ten Commandments were inscribed, *twice*. Why twice? Well, we do have the Golden Calf experience in the middle.

What happened here? The Hebrews were slaves in Egypt for several generations. God chose Moshe to lead the Hebrews out of slavery, used many signs and wonders, inflicted plagues on the Egyptians, parted the Red Sea, protected the Hebrews in the desert with the pillars of clouds by day and pillars of fire by night, provided sustenance with manna in order to facilitate a long journey into freedom in the Land of Israel. While in the desert the Hebrews came upon Mount Sinai where they were preparing for something big. This was to be an *awesome* experience in every sense of the word.

Moshe goes alone to the summit of Mount Sinai where he stays for forty days and nights, at the end of which God inscribes the first set of tablets with the Ten Commandments to be given to the Hebrews. (Devarim, Eikev 8:11). Moshe comes down with the tablets and, of course, finds the people having prepared themselves spiritually for this big revelation which proceeds according to plan, and the people live happily ever after. *Wrong!* Instead, after being warned by God, Moshe comes down from the mountain and discovers the people in the midst of a depraved celebration surrounding this Golden Calf idol they had created in Moshe's absence. Moshe smashes the tablets and then destroys the Golden Calf. (Devarim, Eikev 9:12-21). Imagine that, Moshe, the person chosen by God to lead the Hebrews, destroys the tablets on which God inscribed the Ten Commandments.

Moshe is despondent and terrified that God's anger at the turn of events here would result in the destruction of the people. What happened here? How does this seminal event in the spiritual journey of the nascent Jewish people take such a bad turn?

Clearly the shock and awe approach, with many signs and wonders along the way, did not work. Slave mentality and being too deeply ingrained in the surrounding pagan culture in Egypt for generations made it very difficult for the people to shake off the bonds of their prior existence. As clear as it was that there was One God, who protected the Hebrews and freed them from slavery, as a step along the path of God fulfilling promises made to their ancestors, acceptance of the true nature of God proved to be beyond the capacity for understanding of many of the Hebrews.

Moshe reminds the people how stiff-necked they are, repeatedly being defiant towards God. (Devarim, Eikev 9:6-8,22-24). "You have been rebels against God from the day that I knew you," Moshe reminded the people. (Devarim, Eikev, 9:24).

Much as Moshe was convinced that God would destroy the Hebrews as punishment for their transgressions he argued with God again. Moshe pleaded with God to think of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. Do not destroy your people, redeemed in your greatness, Moshe reminded God. (Devarim, Eikev, 9:26-29). Moshe stays another forty days and forty nights at the peak of Mount Sinai. At the end God agrees to carve another two tablets like the first and the Ten Commandments are given to Moshe once again, this time conveyed by Moshe to the Hebrews. (Devarim, Eikev 9:25 — 10:5). Finally, the Revelation at Sinai is complete.

Now Moshe emphasizes the power of love. As Moshe says: Love God, serve God with all your heart and soul and observe the commandments and you will benefit. (Devarim, Eikev 10:12-13, 11:1). Follow these principles and you will come to possess the land across the Jordan River, a land flowing with milk and honey. (Devarim, Eikev 11:8-9). This teaching is summed

up in the second paragraph of the Shema, which appears in this parsha, along with the reminder to “place these words upon your heart and soul”, represented in the practice of using of Tefillin, and “write them on the doorposts of your house and your gates”, represented by affixing Mezu-zot to doorposts in our homes. (Devarim, Eikev, 11:13-21).

Of course, loving God and following the teachings of the Torah was to be quite a chal-lenge through history. The Neviim and Ketuvim are replete with examples of transgressions. Ido-latry was clearly with us for a long time after the Golden Calf incident.

In the days of the Prophets the people were repeatedly warned about the consequences of going astray and the importance of following the path of the Torah. We are told of the Temple being defiled at times with idols and pagan sacrifices. There is even a later golden calves story recorded in the First Book of Kings in which King Jeroboam of the northern Kingdom of Israel made two calves of gold for the people to worship. (I Kings 12:25-33).

That said, the injunction to love God and follow God’s path has served us well through the millennia. Idol worship by the Jewish people, for example, is clearly a thing of the distant path.

The Jewish people have survived a great deal. Nearly two thousand years ago we sur-vived the calamity of the loss of the Temple. We have suffered adversity throughout history. Critical to survival to the present day has been love of Torah and continuing to apply the teach-ings of the Torah to everyday life.

The Torah is still with us and the Jewish people continue to bring knowledge and under-standing of God to the world at large. In Eikev, Moshe’s narrative evolves to one of following the Torah as an exercise of love of God, leading to God’s reward of sustenance in the Land of Israel. May we continue to merit God’s favor as we continue to bring the Torah into the future. Shabbat Shalom!