

[Kohelet Discussion](#)

D'VAR TORAH: EIKEV

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Eikev literally means “reward”. The Israelites are encouraged by Moses to have trust in Hashem, and good will follow. Incidentally, in the Midrashic sense, Eikev means “heel”. Rashi interprets this to mean that even following unimportant commandments will be rewarded by Hashem with his covenant and kindness.

As Neiel mentioned a few weeks ago, God is no longer the speaker to the Israelites, as the baton has been passed on to Moses, who is in the process of consolidating and speaking about what has transpired since leaving Egypt, and what the Israelites have ahead of them.

Moses reassures the Israelites that despite the overwhelming power of their adversaries, Hashem will do to them he did to Pharaoh in Egypt. Certainly, this biblical verse applies to modern Israel in their dealing with numerous adversaries.

A phrase that has crept into modern parlance is found in Ch 8:3 “Man does not live by bread alone”. And continues “but what emanates from the mouth of Hashem does man live”. “Bread” here is mistranslated, as in the Torah, the word is “manna”, not “lechem”. Rashi suspects this sentence simply is pondering whether anyone can live in the long term on manna alone.

Moses warns “Financial and material success will make your heart haughty and you will forget Hashem.” You will perish if you forget Hashem, despite your worldly success.

Moses then describes the Israelites as a stiff necked people, going so far as to say Ch 9:24 “You have been rebels against Hashem from the day I knew you” (Not a good way to win friends and influence people!) He goes on to chastise the Israelites for the golden calf fiasco, and saying that it was he that asked for God’s forgiveness for the Israelites’ actions, consisting of 40 days and nights on Mt. Sinai.

Moses repeatedly states that “It shall come to pass that if you listen to these laws...”, good things will follow. If the commandments are not followed (if you do not listen to them), the wrath of Hashem will be upon you.

With all the talking by Moses to the Israelites in this parsha, of necessity, there has to be a lot of listening. The importance of listening and the importance of remembrance are at the crux of my dvar today.

The word “Shema” appears 92 times in Dvarim and is generally translated as “listen”. However, other translations of Shema include “harken”, “pay attention”, “heed” and “hear.” Hashem wants us to become a listening people. As Rabbi Sacks notes, there is no word for “to obey” in the Torah, the significance of this being that blind obedience is not a virtue in Judaism, but that listening, internalizing and responding to the commandments is what Hashem wants.

The cultures of ancient Greece and Rome were visual cultures – art, architecture, theatre, etc. “Knowing is seeing” remains the dominant metaphor of Western culture, with such words as “hindsight”, “foresight”, and “insight.” When we understand something, the common answer is “I see”. Judaism, on the other hand is a nonvisual culture – worshipping an unseen God and refraining from making sacred images. Hashem communicates with commands and sounds, not sight. When seeing a play in the theatre or a baseball game, there is a sense of detachment. Listening, however, is a form of engagement.

A phrase frequently stated by Moses is “If only you would listen”. This is reflective of a deeply spiritual act, since listening to Hashem is to be open to Hashem. Listening, in fact, is often the greatest gift in an interpersonal relationship. In our relationship with God, if we want God to listen to us, we have to be prepared to listen to him. Rabbi Sacks notes that the ability to listen to God prepares us for listening to our fellow humans. Why would Hashem have chosen Moses in the encounter at the burning bush to be the leader of the Israelites? After all, Moses himself replied Ex 4:10 “I am not a man of words, I am slow of speech and tongue”. Why would God choose a man who had difficulty speaking? As Rabbi Sacks ponders “Perhaps one who cannot speak learns how to listen”. He also believes that listening to others is profoundly spiritual, and is the most effective form of conflict resolution. To listen to someone does not mean agreeing with that person, but it does mean caring.

As Jews our interaction with God and listening to his commandments serves as a template for how we relate to our spouses, our children, and our colleagues. Great listeners have more power to affect others’ lives than great speakers.

Moving on to the importance of remembrance, Moses uses the word “zachor” very often in this parsha. How fortuitous that Misty posted an article relating to this topic in this week’s Kohelet Newsletter. Zachor, whose roots “Zion, Chet, Raish”, can mean either remember, memory and memorial, appears more than 200 times in the Bible. Moses knew that the character of a nation is forged during difficult times, such as the 40 year wandering in the desert. People bury their differences and there is a sense of community with strangers pulling together, the aftermath of 9/11 being such an example. Nations survive crises but often come apart during times of power and prestige, like ancient Greece and Rome. Additionally, according to the Columbia University

historian Yosef Yerushalmi in his 1982 book entitled “Zachor”, the Greeks saw no transcendent meaning to history as a whole. Moses somehow knew that without remembrance of the values that nations fought for – justice, equality, independence, freedom – those same nations would lose their sense of solidarity. Those who accrue wealth often become entitled, losing their connection with fellow citizens, while the less well off perceive injustice. This is a formula for internal decay and subsequent collapse of a society, and Moses was astute enough to foresee this danger. He appreciated that memory/remembrance is important for the moral health of a society. “Zachor” marks several of his phrases in Dvarim: “Remember that you were slaves in Egypt,” “Remember what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt,” etc. There is no better example of remembrance than Yom HaZikaron in Israel. When a siren blares for two minutes, the entire country comes to a standstill, and the Holocaust remembered.

And so, the twin attributes of Judaism, the ability to listen and the necessity of remembrance and memory, are two major reasons why Judaism has survived to this day. Tisha B’Av, as observed by a few Koheletans earlier this month, being a classic example of the power of remembrance which, in fact, colors our present existence. The Jewish view of the past, unlike the Greek view of history, is that the past also exists in the present. Destruction of the Temple, 10 commandments, the Exodus – they remain with us today, almost palpable, as they are expressions of our continuing relationship with Hashem.

Some critics have argued that the Jewish obsession with the past can be burdensome, weighing us down, making it difficult to move forward. Do you think that there is a downside to how Jews view history, or do you agree that keeping historical events of the past alive in the present has enduring value and purpose?

In our own country, these values seem to have nearly disappeared in our own lifetime. Embracing the importance of listening, instead of not hearing others, as well as the power of remembrance of events past instead of white washing history and ignoring it all together, would certainly help America move beyond the morass in which it currently finds itself