

Today's Torah Portion: Ekev

Summary and Issues

Synopsis:

Moses continues his discourse, telling Israel that, by following all the rules established by God, they will experience great blessings - health, abundant produce, and fertility. All of their enemies will be vanquished and all signs of idolatry destroyed.

A second admonition to obey the laws is followed by a brief description of Israel's wanderings in the desert. Despite 40 years of hardship, their clothing did not wear out, nor did their feet swell. Moses reminds the people to give thanks to God and maintain faith, even after they've entered their bountiful land. The people should never assume that it is by their own hand alone that they enjoy the fruits of the land. All that they have is from God.

Moses reminds the people that by not following God's commandments, Israel will doom itself.

Issues:

1) Deuteronomy 8:10 lays the foundation for the Birkat Hamazon, the Grace after meals: "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to God for the good land which God has given you."

The Birkat Hamazon has three blessings, thanking God for: 1) feeding everyone; 2) for the Land and for food, and 3) for (in the future) rebuilding Jerusalem. Why do these blessings appear, and why in this particular order?

One possibility: Blessing #1 is a reminder of the manna which fed our ancestors in the wilderness (see 8:16); blessing #2 relates to 8:10, "Give thanks to the Lord for the land which He has given you (which the children of Israel are about to enter); and blessing #3 refers not only to the physical Jerusalem, but also the spiritual Jerusalem, the Jerusalem that will exist in the time of the Messiah. Therefore, the Grace links us to the past (#1 - manna), present (#2 - the Land of Israel) and future (#3). In this way each meal is transformed into a timeless, sacred experience.

What, to you, is the significance of blessing God after eating? Why do Jews have their main "Grace" after the meal, while Christians do theirs before? (Maybe we want to see how good the food is first...) Is it easier to be thankful on an empty or full stomach?

2) The popular expression that we not live by bread alone comes from Deuteronomy 8:3. This saying, however, eliminates the second half of the verse and completely changes the meaning. Compare the implications of the complete verse with the popular expression. Which do you

prefer?

Woodie Allen: "Man does not live on bread alone. At times there must be a beverage."

3) Looking at verse 8:18, how would this attitude toward the source of one's wealth influence the way a person lives? The way he gives? Is this attitude common nowadays? How would the world be different if it were more common?

4) The second paragraph of the Shma is found in this portion. Find it. Many people have trouble taking its words literally. It is perhaps helpful to recall that this message was intended for the entire nation, not individuals. In other words, if Joe Cohen eats a ham sandwich, it doesn't mean the rains will stop falling and there will be no wheat for Joe Cohen. However, if an entire nation falls into immoral behavior, mistreating its citizens, its guests, its animals and its ecology, eventually that nation will suffer.

How will it suffer? Think of all the "great" nations and empires in the history of the world. What brought about their decay? The second paragraph of the Shma is as important to us today as it was to the ancient Israelites.

5) In Ekev, people are commanded to befriend the stranger. (10:19) How does this community formally welcome new families or individuals into the area? How do you?

6) Moses tells the people that they are required to "fear" God. Yirah usually means fear. In the Shma we are commanded to love God "V'Ahavta..." How can such emotions be commanded? How does love or fear for a parent, for instance, originate? Do we need to fear in order to "behave"? How should fear be interpreted here - as "respect," or "follow the commandments of..." or "be afraid and run away from..."?

"He who truly fears a thing flees from it, but he who truly fears God flees unto Him"

"I fear God, and next to God I chiefly fear him who fears him not."

-- two sayings by medieval Moslem commentators

NJPS ¹²It 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.

¹³If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, ¹⁴I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain

RASHI **12 It is a land which the LORD your God looks after.** He looks after all lands, doesn't He? "Who cut a channel for the torrents and a path for the thunderstorms, to rain down on uninhabited land, on the wilderness where no man is" (Job 38:25-26). But it is as if He looks after it alone, and His care for it takes care of all the other lands as well. **On which the LORD your God always keeps His eye.** To see what it needs, and to keep issuing decrees with regard to it—sometimes for the better, and sometimes for the worse (see B. RH 17b). **From year's beginning.** When judgment is made about how the year will end.

13 If, then, you obey. "If" here logically follows v. 11. The land soaks up its water "if you obey." The double form of the verb "obey" in Hebrew indicates: If you "hearken" (OJPS) to the original commandments, then you will hearken to later ones as well. See similarly my comment to 8:19. **The commandments that I enjoin upon you this day.** They should seem to you as fresh as if I were giving them to you for the first time today. **Loving the LORD your God.** You must not say, "I am studying God's law in order to become rich" or "to become a rabbi" or "to get a reward"; rather, everything you do you must do out of love, and in the end reward will come. **Serving Him with all your heart and soul.** The "service of the heart" is prayer. Remember that the king said to Daniel, "Your God, whom you serve so regularly" (Dan. 6:17). Now, was there a Jewish Temple in Babylonia? He was referring to Daniel's praying: "Daniel... went to his house, in whose upper chamber he had had windows made facing Jerusalem, and three times a day he knelt down, prayed, and made confession to his God" (Dan. 6:11). We learn the same from the example of David, who said, "Take my prayer as an offering of incense" (Ps. 141:2). Note that "your" is plural here, in contrast to "your" of "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" (6:5), which is singular. But that verse was addressed to individuals and this one to the collective.

14 I will grant the rain for your land. Once you have fulfilled your obligation, I will fulfill Mine. **In season.** Literally, "in its time"—the nighttime, so that it does not get in your way. Another reading: "its time" is Friday nights, when everyone is at home observing the Sabbath. **The early rain.** The Hebrew word is related to the verb "moisten." This is the rain that falls after the crop is sown, to moisten the earth and the seeds. **The late.** This is the rain that falls close to harvest time, to make the stalks fill out; the Hebrew term for this rain, *malkosh*, sounds like "fill-stalk." (It is actually connected with an Aramaic word meaning "late.") Another reading: it is an acronym for *melilot* and *kashin*, "grain" and "straw." **You shall gather in your new grain.** You shall gather it in, not your enemies—as in "Nevermore will I give your new grain to your enemies for food" (Isa. 62:8), and not as in "After the Israelites had done their sowing, Midian, Amalek, and the Kedemites would come up and raid them; they would attack them, destroy the produce of the land all the way to Gaza, and leave no means of sustenance in Israel, not a sheep or an ox or an ass" (Judg. 6:3-4).

NAHMANIDES **12 It is a land which the LORD your God looks after.** Since this phrase does not connect God's "looking after" the land with rain, the midrash quoted by Rashi would seem to be implied in the text. **On which the LORD your God always keeps His eye.** The talmudic comment cited by Rashi [L] conceals a profound mystery. This land is looked after by All, it is All, and all the other lands are in Truth supported by it. [M]

13 With all your heart and soul. Rashi's comment, which comes from the Sifrei, is to be explained as follows. God does not miraculously provide the rain and do all the other things described here, except on the basis of how the majority of the people are acting. But individuals will live by their own merits or die for their own sins. What our text is saying is that, if the Israelites observe all the commandments out of perfect love, He will do all these miracles for them; if they worship idols, He will do the opposite. You must know that special miracles are not performed, whether for good or ill, except for those who are completely righteous or completely evil. God treats ordinary people with good or ill that appears to occur in the normal way of the world, according to their behavior.

[L] Both here and in the previous comment, Nahmanides quotes directly without mentioning Rashi. [M] "All" is being used here by Nahmanides to name an aspect of God; see his comment to Gen. 24:1.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS **12 It is a land which the LORD your God looks after.** Keeping tabs on it and on its inhabitants (Bekhor Shor). **On which the LORD your God always keeps His eye.** Precisely judging its inhabitants' deeds (Bekhor Shor). **Beginning.** This is the only occurrence of this Hebrew word (out of 51) that is missing the *κ* (Masorah).

14 In season. Literally, "in its time"—on Tuesday and Friday nights (Bekhor Shor). **You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil.** Since I might take Josh. 1:8 literally when it says, "Let not this Book of the Teaching cease from your lips, but recite it day and night," this verse tells us, "You have permission to work at your occupations" (Hizkuni).

OJPS ¹²a land which the LORD thy God careth for; the eyes of the LORD thy God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.

¹³And it shall come to pass, if ye shall hearken diligently unto My commandments which I command you—this day, to love the LORD your God, and, to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, ¹⁴that I will give the rain of your land in its season, the former rain and the latter rain, that thou mayest gather in thy corn,

RASHBAM commandments, it is a land... on which the LORD your God always keeps His eye to water it with rain from heaven from year's beginning to year's end, giving it rain when rain is needed. If, then, you obey the commandments... I will grant the rain for your land in season and you will eat your fill without toil. If not... He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain.

IBN EZRA **12 On which the LORD your God always keeps His eye.** This is metaphoric, of course. The image is that of someone who is always looking to see what the land needs so he can provide it in good time. Vv. 13-14 describe the obvious consequence. **Beginning.** Note that *κ* is missing from the Hebrew word; this is a frequent occurrence.

14 The early rain. Literally, the "indicating" rain, the rain that indicates the year will be a good one. **The late.** Since the first word refers to the early rain, this must obviously refer to the late rain.

NJPS and wine and oil—¹⁵I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill. ¹⁶Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. ¹⁷For the LORD's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the LORD is assigning to you.

¹⁸Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a

RASHI 15 I will also provide grass in the fields. You will not need to lead your cattle to pasture. Another reading: You will shear your crop all through the rainy season and toss what you cut in front of your cattle. Just stop doing that 30 days before harvest time, and your crop will not be diminished at all from its full amount. **You shall eat your fill.** This is a separate blessing—that your bread will be so filled with goodness that even a bit of it will fill your bellies and leave you satisfied.

16 Take care. Once you have eaten your fill. For it is not want, but satiety, that causes people to rebel against the Holy One: "When you have eaten your fill... beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the LORD your God" (8:12, 14). **Not to be lured away.** "Away" from the Torah. **To serve other gods.** Once a man goes away from the Torah, he goes and holds fast to idolatry, just as David said: "For they have driven me out today, so that I cannot have a share in the LORD's possession, but am told, 'Go and worship other gods'" (1 Sam. 26:19). Now who told him this? What he meant was, "Having been driven away from the Torah, I am on the point of worshipping other gods"—or rather, "different" gods. For they are different to those who worship them than the Lord is to those who worship Him. One cries out to them and they do not answer, treating their worshipers as something "other."

17 The ground will not yield its produce. Not even what you yourselves originally "produced" when you came to sow it: "You have sowed much and brought in little" (Hag. 1:6). **You will soon perish.** On top of all the other punishments, I will exile you from the land that caused you to sin. A parable: A king sent his son to a feast, warning him, "Do not eat more than you need to, so that you may keep yourself clean enough to come home." But the son paid no attention. He ate and drank far too much, and vomited all over the other guests. They took him by the arms and legs and tossed him out of the palace. — And this will happen to you *soon*. "I will not give you any leeway." You might argue that He did give leeway to the generation of the Flood: "Let the days allowed him be one hundred and twenty years" (Gen. 6:3). But they had no one to learn from, and you do have someone to learn from.

18 Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart. Even after you are exiled, you must mark yourselves by observance of the commandments. Don tefillin and make *mezuzot*, so that they are not new to you when at last you return: "Erect markers, set up signposts; keep in mind the highway, the road that you traveled. Return, Maiden Israel! Return to these towns of yours!" (Jer. 31:21).

NAHMANIDES 15 **You shall eat your fill.** See the comments of Rashi and Ibn Ezra. In my view, the first half of the verse is not parenthetical, as Ibn Ezra thinks; your sheep and cattle will also be able to eat their fill. As the Sifrei points out, when your animals eat their fill they can work the land for you: "A rich harvest comes through the strength of the ox" (Prov. 14:4). Another possible reading is that "your cattle" are provided with grass so that you may "eat your fill" of their young. This interpretation is made plausible by Jer. 31:12, "They shall come and shout on the heights of Zion, radiant over the bounty of the LORD—over new grain and wine and oil, and over sheep and cattle." And this is the correct interpretation.

18 Impress these My words upon your very heart. See Rashi's comment. Though tefillin and *mezuzot* are personal obligations, which one is required to observe every place on earth just as one would in the land of Israel, the midrash quoted by Rashi conceals a profound mystery, to which I have already alluded in my comments to Lev. 18:25. Note that this paragraph repeats the commandments of 6:7-9, implying that we are still obligated to fulfill them even after being exiled, outside the land. It is in fact from this that we learn that all the commandments that are personal obligations are obligatory everywhere. We are exempt outside the land only from the commandments that directly apply to the soil—e.g., the tithes and the priestly gifts. This is how the Sifrei explains it. The point of the midrash is that "impress these My words" follows immediately upon "you will soon perish" of the previous verse. But this particular passage is actually focused on doing these things "in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to assign to them" (v. 21). Perhaps, though, it is saying that you must do these things so that you may endure in the land forever—*after* you return from exile. According to the straightforward sense of the passage, it could be that the purpose of the repetition was the differences in the section about "reciting them" (v. 19); see my next comment.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 16 **Other gods.** They are sometimes literally made into something "other"—if the idol is made of gold and the owner needs the gold, he will replace it with one of silver; if of silver, he may replace it with one of copper (Hizkuni).

17 **You will soon perish.** The only other occurrence of the phrase is in Josh. 23:16 (Masorah). Rather, "you will soon be exiled." The Hebrew word is used this way in Isa. 27:13, "the *strayed* who are in the land of Assyria" (Hizkuni).

OJPS and thy wine, and thine oil. ¹⁵And I will give grass in thy fields for thy cattle, and thou shalt eat and be satisfied. ¹⁶Take heed to yourselves, lest your heart be deceived, and ye turn aside, and serve other gods, and worship them; ¹⁷and the anger of the LORD be kindled against you, and He shut up the heaven, so that there shall be no rain, and the ground shall not yield her fruit; and ye perish quickly from off the good land which the LORD giveth you.

¹⁸Therefore shall ye lay up these My words in your heart and in your soul; and ye shall bind them for a sign upon your hand, and they shall be for frontlets

IBN EZRA 15 **Thus you shall eat your fill.** As the punctuation of NJPS makes clear, "thus" refers to the "new grain and wine and oil" of v. 14, not the grass mentioned in the first part of our verse.

17 Its produce. I explained this in my comment to Lev. 26:4. **You will soon perish.** You will be exiled from it by starvation.

18 Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart. Since the land is good, if you fail to impress these words on your heart and end up perishing from hunger, it is your own responsibility. **A symbol.** See my comment to 6:8.

NJPS symbol on your forehead, ¹⁹and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up; ²⁰and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates—²¹to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.

²²If, then, you faithfully keep all this Instruction that I command you, loving the LORD your God, walking in all His

RASHI 19 Reciting them. From the moment your children know how to speak, you must teach them, "Moses commanded us a law" (33:4), so that this is how they learn to speak. Our Sages derived from this verse that as soon as a child begins to speak his father must converse with him in Hebrew and teach him Torah, and that if he does not he as good as buries him, since the purpose of the recitation is "that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children" (as v. 21 really says; see OJPS). If you do so, your days *will* be multiplied; if you don't, they won't. For with regard to words of Torah, positive statements imply the corresponding negative, and negative statements imply the corresponding positive.

21 The land that the LORD swore to your fathers to assign to them. He did not swear to give it to "you," but to "them." We thus find that the doctrine of resurrection of the dead can be derived from the Torah.

22 If, then, you faithfully keep. Again the Torah uses two forms of the Hebrew verb. The Torah requires multiple "keepings" if one is to learn and not forget. **Walking in all His ways.** As He is compassionate, so must you be compassionate; as He does acts of kindness, so must you do acts of kindness. **Holding fast to Him.** Can one really say this? After all, He is "a devouring fire" (9:3). Rather, you must hold fast to the Sages and their disciples, and I will regard you as having held fast to Him.

NAHMANIDES 19 Teach them to your children—reciting them. Rather, "teach your children to speak of them." In 6:7 it is we who are to "recite them," but here we are told that we must teach our children to do so. "Impress them upon your children" of 6:7 uses a different Hebrew verb than does our verse; the meaning there is really just to "repeat" the commandments, while here we are instructed to "teach" them so that they will understand them and can discuss them.

21 As long as there is a heaven over the earth. This too is an addition to the Deuteronomy 6 passage, invoking it throughout the generations. Or our phrase, which literally says "as the days of the heavens above the earth" (OJPS), may be a reference to the primordial heaven and earth of Gen. 1:1. One who is enlightened will understand.

22 Holding fast to Him. Ibn Ezra calls this "a profound religious mystery," but that mystery is not derived from this text. He is perhaps saying that one must love the Lord and walk in His ways in order to be worthy of holding fast to Him at last. But Josh. 23:7-8, "Do not utter the names of their gods or swear by them; do not serve them or bow down to them. But hold fast to the LORD your God as you have done to this day," shows that the Israelites had already been "holding fast" to the Lord on a regular basis. So it seems that our verse is simply another of the warnings not to commit idolatry by transferring one's thoughts from the Lord to other gods and not to imagine that there is any substance to idolatry: "Worship none but Him, and hold fast to Him" (13:5). One must not worship God along with some other god, but only Him alone, in both thought and deed. It could be that "holding fast" includes remembering God and loving Him always, never letting your thoughts leave Him "when you lie down and when you get up" (v. 19), to the extent that even when speaking with other people one's thoughts remain before God. It could be that the lives of people who are on that level are "bound up in the bundle of life" (1 Sam. 25:29) even while they are still alive, being themselves a habitation for the Shekhinah, as the Kuzari hints. I have already discussed this in my comment to Lev. 18:5. Joshua tells them to hold fast to God "as you have done to this day" because while they were in the wilderness, eating manna, drinking from the well, and all in all completely dependent on miracles, their thoughts and deeds were continuously on God. Now, in the land, once these miracles had disappeared, he warns them not to let their attention stray from the glorious and awesome Lord.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 19 When you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up. Literally, "when you sit in your house, when you walk on the road, when you lie down, and when you stand up" (compare OJPS); walking, sitting, lying, and standing are the four human postures (Bekhor Shor).

22 Walking in all His ways. Running your affairs in the same way that He runs His world—with righteousness and justice (Sforno). **Holding fast to Him.** Perhaps, as Ibn Ezra writes, this refers to the soul's holding fast to Him after its separation from the body (Abarbanel).

OJPS between your eyes. ¹⁹And ye shall teach them to your children, talking of them, when thou sittest in thy house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. ²⁰And thou shalt write them upon the door-posts of thy house, and upon thy gates; ²¹that your days may be multiplied, and the days of your children, upon the land which the LORD swore unto your fathers to give them, as the days of the heavens above the earth.

²²For if ye shall diligently keep all this commandment which I command you, to do it, to love the LORD your God, to walk

RASHBAM 21 As long as there is a heaven over the earth. For from that heaven I will grant the rain, and the ground will yield its produce.

IBN EZRA 21 As long as there is a heaven over the earth. If you do impress these words on your heart, you will not perish from the land, but will live there as long as there is a heaven over the earth.

22 If, then, you faithfully keep all this Instruction. This is not merely a condition of remaining on the land—you will not enter the land in the first place, let alone conquer it, if you do not faithfully keep all the commandments of the Lord. **Loving the LORD your God.** In your heart. **Walking in all His ways.** Never changing course or backsliding. **Holding fast to Him.** As a consequence of loving the Lord and walking in all His ways. This "holding fast to Him" is a profound religious mystery.

MARC BRETTLER

"If you carefully heed my commandments" With the commandments (or treaty stipulations) given in the first paragraph of the *Sh'ma*, we move on in the second paragraph to the implications of observing or not observing them. The reward (p. 106)

LAWRENCE A. HOFFMAN

WE ARRIVE AT THE SECOND BIBLICAL SECTION OF THE SH'MA: DEUTERONOMY 11:31-21, KNOWN AS "ACCEPTANCE OF THE YOKE OF THE COMMANDMENTS" (KABBALAT OL HAMITZVOT).

ELLIOT N. DORFF

"If you carefully heed my commandments" Abiding by God's commandments seems to guarantee reward; disobeying them incurs God's punishment. As the Rabbis themselves painfully noted, this poses the problem that in life "the righteous suffer and the evil prosper" (*tzaddik v'ra lo, rasha v'tov lo*). They consequently devised a variety of ways (p. 107)

וְהָיָה אִם-שָׁמַעַתְּ אֶת-צִוְּיֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֹתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת-יְיָ אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעִבְדוֹ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּכֶם וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם. וְנָתַתִּי מִטֶּר-אֶרְצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֶה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ וְאֶסְפָּת דֶּגַּף וְתִירָשׁ וְיִצְהָרֵךְ. וְנָתַתִּי¹⁰

¹⁰If you carefully heed my commandments, the ones I command you today, to love Adonai your God and worship Him with all your mind and body, then I shall grant your land's rain in its season, in the autumn and in the spring, that you might gather your grain, wine and oil. ¹¹I shall (p. 106)

DAVID ELLENSON

"If you carefully heed my commandments" The commentary in the present-day Reconstructionist *Kol Han'shamah* aptly describes the problem in this paragraph: Its detailed description of the "bountiful or (p. 108)

DANIEL LANDES

"Today, to love" We pause after "today" (*hayom*) so as not to imply that we "love" God only "today."

JUDITH PLASKOW

"If you carefully heed my commandments . . ." The second paragraph of the *Sh'ma* asserts a connection precious to the Deuteronomist but disputed elsewhere in the Bible and contested by

everyday experience: "As you sow, so shall you reap." Reward and punishment flow directly from human deserving; those who obey God prosper, and those who defy God perish. This theology of suffering—"for our sins we are punished"—has (p. 109)

JOEL M. HOFFMAN

"Command you" Plural ("ye" or "y'all"), perhaps in contrast to the singular above. Here it is particularly unfortunate that Modern Standard English cannot convey this distinction, because the paragraph alternates oddly (and perhaps even in error) between singular and plural. (p. 109)

SH'MA

grant grass in your fields for your cattle, that you might eat your fill. ¹²Take care lest your mind tempt you to rebel by worshipping other gods and by bowing down to them. ¹³For then the fire and fury of Adonai will turn against you. ¹⁴Adonai will stop the flow of the sky. ¹⁵There will be no rain. ¹⁶The earth will not grant its produce. ¹⁷You will quickly perish from the good land that Adonai grants you. ¹⁸So put these words of mine in charge of your mind and body, bind them to your hand as a sign and set them between your eyes as a symbol; teach them to your children, using them when you sit at home and when you walk about, when you lie down and when you stand up; write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates — that your days and your children's days in the land that Adonai promised to give to your ancestors may be as numerous as the days that the sky overlooks the earth.

MARC BRETTLER

for proper behavior is agricultural productivity and securing the Land of Israel, while infraction of the treaty through the worship of other gods (which would be like dallying with a rival political alliance) will occasion agricultural disaster and exile. Human sovereigns too might threaten exile, but only God has the power to wipe out agriculture as well.

The Hebrew here is plural, referring to the whole community, because Deuteronomy is typically concerned with the covenant with Israel the nation, not its individuals. The punishments enumerated (exile and agricultural disaster) are therefore national in scope. Elsewhere, of course (e.g., Ezek. 18), where the metaphoric model is not a treaty, the Bible emphasizes personal responsibility, and individual punishment or reward.

עֲשֵׂב בַשָּׂדֶה לְבִהֶמְתְּךָ וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ.
¹²הִשְׁמְרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן-יִפְתֶּה לְבַבְכֶם וְסָר-
 תֶּם וַעֲבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְהִשְׁ-
 תַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם. ¹³וְחָרָה אַף-יְיָ בְּכֶם
¹⁴וְעָצַר אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה מָטָר
¹⁶וְהָאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֶּן אֶת-יְבוּלָהּ וְנִאֲבַד-
 תֶּם מִהָרָה מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר
 יְיָ נָתַן לָכֶם. ¹⁸וְשַׂמְתֶּם אֶת-דְּבָרֵי
 אֱלֹהֵי עַל-לְבַבְכֶם וְעַל-נַפְשְׁכֶם וְקִשְׁרֶתֶם
 אֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדְּכֶם וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפֹת
 בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם. וְלִמַּדְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם
 לְדָבָר בָּם בְּשֹׁבְתְךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבִלְכְּתְךָ
 בַּדֶּרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְבְךָ וּבְקוּמְךָ. וְכִתַּבְתֶּם עַל-
 מְזוֹזֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבִשְׁעָרֶיךָ.

לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיָמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל
 הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָשָׁבַע יְיָ לְאַבְרָהָם לֵאמֹר
 לָהֶם כִּימֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל-הָאָרֶץ.

ELLIOT N. DOR
 to justify God ("a
 moral calculus, a
 come, where peo
 ply said that we c

Why did they
 it out? And how
 eous and wicked

Rabbi Robert
 who lived before
 of Greek culture
 applied the doctr
 nal providence"
 ments mentionec
 apply to individu
 individuals in So
 not completely a
 communal provis
 individually spea
 considers us all
 and the beneficia

This is a much
 the Enlightenme
 doctrine of comr

Moreover, as
 well — the Crus
 rewarded or pun
 but Deuteronom
 even if we restric
 are specified in I
 by drought or fa

How, then, ca
 ond paragraph o

Contemporary
 when we sin agai
 safe food becom
 and punishment

My own apprc
 we cannot fathoi
 nities, it is simpl
 I do not know w
 ment is [the proj
 result of doing a

ELLIOT N. DORFF

to justify God ("theodicies") in the face of the apparent failure of Deuteronomy's neat moral calculus, as expressed here in the *Sh'ma*, believing, for instance, in a world to come, where people's moral accounts would be righted. Sometimes, though, they simply said that we cannot fathom God's justice.

Why did they include this troublesome belief in the *Sh'ma*, when they could have left it out? And how could the Deuteronomist assert it in the first place? Surely the righteous and wicked were not justly compensated in biblical times either.

Rabbi Robert Gordis pointed out that the problem was less acute for biblical Jews who lived before the rise of individualism, a doctrine that developed after the coming of Greek culture. Most biblical authors — certainly in the First Temple period — applied the doctrine of God's justice to communities, not individuals (it was "communal providence" not "individual providence"). That is why the rewards and punishments mentioned here are rain and crops, which affect whole groups, not matters that apply to individuals alone. The story of Abraham arguing with God for the righteous individuals in Sodom (Gen. 18:22–33) indicates that even First-Temple literature was not completely at home with collective rewards and punishments, but the doctrine of communal providence at least enables us to understand how God could be just even if individually speaking, some righteous people suffer and some wicked ones prosper. God considers us all as interwoven within our communities and therefore responsible for, and the beneficiaries of, what the rest of the community does.

This is a much stronger sense of community than contemporary Jews, nourished on the Enlightenment ideology of individualism, are used to. We may therefore find the doctrine of communal providence insufficient to justify God's morality.

Moreover, as the Shoah demonstrates, but as Jews have known in other times as well — the Crusades, for instance — entire communities are sometimes unjustly rewarded or punished. Yes, in all these cases, the perpetrators of evil abused free will, but Deuteronomy's promises do not make exception for the behavior of others. And even if we restrict the discussion to the kind of natural rewards and punishments that are specified in Deuteronomy, are we really willing to say that every people victimized by drought or famine must be wicked or disobedient?

How, then, can we continue to affirm the belief in God's justice contained in the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*?

Contemporary Jewish environmentalists answer the objection by pointing out that when we sin against God's world, pollution results, with the result that clean water and safe food become scarce. This is undoubtedly true, but Deuteronomy connects reward and punishment to *all* the commandments, not just those connected to the environment.

My own approach combines two doctrines of the Rabbis. I too admit that in the end, we cannot fathom God's justice: whether we are talking about individuals or communities, it is simply not true that the righteous always prosper and the wicked suffer; and I do not know why that is. I also believe that "the reward of performing a commandment is [the propensity and opportunity to perform another] commandment, and the result of doing a wicked thing is [the propensity and opportunity to do another] wicked

עֲשֵׂב בְּשָׂדֶךָ לְבָהּ
 12 הִשְׁמָרוּ לָכֶם פִּי
 תִּם וְעִבְדֶתֶם אֶת
 תַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם.
 14 וְעֵצֶר אֶת-הַשֶּׁמֶץ
 16 וְהָאֲדָמָה לֹא תִוֶּה
 תִּם מִהֲרָה מֵעַל
 יִי נִתֵּן לָכֶם.
 אֶלֶּה עַל-לִבְבְּכֶם
 אַתֶּם לְאוֹת עַל-
 בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם. וְלִמֹּן
 לְדָבָר בָּם בְּשֶׁבֶץ
 בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֶׁכֶבֶד וּ
 מִזֹּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבִנְיָ
 לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵי
 הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נָשָׂא
 לָהֶם כִּימֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם

id of Israel, while
 ould be like dally-
 and exile. Human
 pe out agriculture

munity, because
 he nation, not its
 isaster) are there-
 e the metaphoric
 d individual pun-

SH'MA

thing" (M. Avot 4:2). That is, we should do the right thing because it is the right thing and not out of hope for reward, and we should avoid evil acts because they are evil and not out of fear of punishment.

This approach is a far cry from the direct, reward-and-punishment thinking of the second paragraph of the *Sh'ma*, and yet I recite the *Sh'ma* each day because it proclaims God's justice, and justice must be a critical element in the God I affirm. The calculus of reward and punishment articulated in this paragraph may be too simple and ultimately inaccurate, and, for that matter, it may be immoral in the first place to do the right thing and avoid the wrong out of concern for consequences. Nevertheless, I find this paragraph, with all its problems, central to my beliefs, for it insists starkly (even if too starkly) that God is ultimately just.

Somehow, justice is an inherent part of the world and of God; and since God is the model for human beings, the possibility of justice must be inherent in us as well. The Rabbis too had problems with the doctrine of justice announced in this paragraph, but they included it anyway because they too had a deep faith in the ultimate justice of God as the metaphysical backdrop and support for human acts of justice.

DAVID ELLENSON

devastating consequences of Israel's collective relationship to the *mitzvot* . . . offers a supernatural theology that many contemporary Jews find difficult." Simply put, it presents a doctrine of reward and punishment that most liberal Jews have found problematic, if not offensive. It has therefore been removed from most liberal prayer books in the modern era.

Usually, no alternative is provided, but the Reconstructionist liturgy of 1945 substitutes Deuteronomy 28:1–6: "If you will truly give heed to the voice of the Lord your God, by being careful to observe all of His commandments which I am giving you this day, then all these blessings will come upon you: Blessed will you be in the city, and blessed will you be in the country; blessed will be your basket and your kneading trough; blessed will you be in your coming, and blessed will you be in your going." *Kol Han'shamah* follows suit, but only as an alternative, saying that Deuteronomy 28:1–6 encourages "observance in the same language [as Deut. 11], but concentrates on the positive ways in which observance of the *mitzvot* focuses our attention on God's presence."

The Israeli *Ha'avodah Shebalev* provides a similar option: Deuteronomy 30:15–20: "See, I set before you this day life and good, death and evil. For I command you this day to love the Lord your God. . . . I put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life — if you and your offspring would live — by loving the Lord your God, heeding his commandments, and holding fast to Him. For thereby you shall have life and shall long endure upon the soil that the Lord your God swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to give to them." This passage is more consonant than the traditional one with modern ethical sensibilities, and it concludes with a promise of long and prosperous life in Israel. Like *Kol Han'shamah*, however, *Ha'avodah Shebalev* offers it only as an alternative, not a substitute.

JOEL M. HOFFMAN

"Mind and body"

"Land's rain in the existence of the translation tries to Birnbaum offers "rain." The yoreh fe

"That you might

"I shall grant" I

"Eat your fill" I

"Take care" Ag

"Lest your mind and strength"), we deception and per

"The fire and fi anger, as an expres

"When you sit"

"That your days

"As the days tha idiom), so best tra which misses the c the earth." A less l be as permanent a

JUDITH PLASKOV

been very powerful
tion, Jews accused
source of their affl
ishment never ent
The Book of Job c
ery and wrongdoing
ined God as going
ing which it wa
systematically slau
thing but a misguir

JOEL M. HOFFMAN

"Mind and body" As above.

"Land's rain in its season, in the autumn and in the spring" The Hebrew presupposes the existence of the rain. God's promise is to bring it at the right time, a fact that our translation tries to capture. We have no words for the Hebrew *yoreh* and *malkosh*. Birnbaum offers "autumn rains" and "spring rains," while JPS has "early rain" and "late rain." The *yoreh* falls immediately after Sukkot, the *malkosh* in the Spring.

"That you might gather" Singular "you" again. One wonders why.

"I shall grant" Hebrew, *natati*.

"Eat your fill" As in JPS. Birnbaum offers the more literal "eat and be satisfied."

"Take care" Again plural.

"Lest your mind tempt you" In keeping with "mind" for *levav* (see above, "Mind, body, and strength"), we translate *yifteh* as "tempt," with the correlative connotations of folly, deception and persuasion.

"The fire and fury . . . will turn against you" From *ch.r.h*, "to burn," but used with anger, as an expression for getting angry. Others, "anger flare up" or "anger blaze."

"When you sit" Again singular.

"That your days" Plural.

"As the days that the sky overlooks the earth" Probably a deliberate simile (not just an idiom), so best translated word for word. Both Birnbaum and JPS have "for as long as," which misses the connection between "your days," and "the days that the sky overlooks the earth." A less literal translation might read: ". . . that your stay in the land . . . will be as permanent as the sun's dominion over the earth."

JUDITH PLASKOW

been very powerful in Jewish history, as again and again in the face of exile and destruction, Jews accused themselves of disobedience and looked to their own behavior as the source of their affliction. Yet, for all its importance, the notion of suffering as just punishment never entirely eclipsed other interpretations of the nature and purpose of evil. The Book of Job constitutes a passionate attack on any simple correlation between misery and wrongdoing, and, after the destruction of the Second Temple, the Rabbis imagined God as going into exile with God's People. In the aftermath of the Holocaust, during which it was the most pious segments of European Jewry who were most systematically slaughtered, it is difficult to see the Deuteronomistic perspective as anything but a misguided attempt to vindicate God at the expense of suffering human beings.

SH'MA

But it is not necessary to read this paragraph of the *Sh'ma* as a literal statement about divine reward and punishment. In a world whose survival depends partly on the human capacity to value creation and care for it wisely, it is possible to interpret the passage more naturalistically. If we are able to develop an ecological consciousness, if we treat the earth with respect, if we are aware that we are embedded in a great web of life of which God is the ultimate source and sustainer, then the earth will bear fruit for us and the rain will come in its season. But if we believe we can trample on or transcend the constraints of nature, if we forget the sacredness of all things and make idols of our own wealth and power, "the earth will not grant its produce," and both we and our world may perish. *Siddur Birkat Shalom* expresses these ideas in a lovely meditation on the *Sh'ma*: "Israel, your covenant with God is made of choices: holiness or profanity, life or its destruction; you can never keep from choosing. If you set yourself to love God with everything you have . . . God's gifts will be yours: a vital earth, its seas and continents moving slowly in their own way; the rain and sun and snow and clouds forming and changing. . . . But if you forget God and choose instead to fashion gods of your own . . . , you may lose everything you have. . . . This blue-green earth, so beautiful, so solitary, is as fragile as you are and as precious. Beware lest in giving way to excess you risk too much. . . ."

MARC BRETTLER

"*A donai said to Me* shares some of the prior ones, such as the first love of God through (here, the tassels) : adherence to God's will a non-Deuteronomy

ELLIOT N. DORFF

"*Speak to the children of Israel*" Not to the elders alone, but to the entire People of Israel. Jewish tradition *not* to be an esoteric religion, whose beliefs and practices are known to an elite group of people alone, but rather a religion of the masses. Similarly, the first two paragraphs of the *Sh'ma* tell us that we must teach our children the heritage so that (p. .

DAVID ELLENSON

"*Make themselves* Reform Jews have worn a *tallit*, most of excluded this passage *Sh'ma*. Isaac Mayer Wise Deut. 11 passage but Scholarship seemed to

JOEL M. HOFFMAN

"*Make themselves* term. But if a (Artscroll). Also, *tsits* ders why the word is

not that I command you this
 r God with all your heart
 the rain for your land in
 spring. You shall gather in
 provide grass in your fields
 d be satisfied. Take care
 u stray and serve other
 NAI's anger will flare up
 the sky so that there will
 field its produce. You will
 and that ADONAI is giving
 rds of mine upon your heart
 a sign upon your hand and
 1 them to your children,
 in your home, when you
 own, and when you rise
 posts of your home and on
 ie days of your children, on
 ur ancestors to give them,
 ie heavens are above the

Deuteronomy 11:13-21

he people Israel, and in-
 ion they shall put *tzitzit* on
 acing a thread of blue on
 er. That shall be your *tzitzit*;
 r all the mitzvot of ADONAI,
 ced by your eyes and heart
 will remember and fulfill
 e your God. I am ADONAI
 brought you out of the land
 our God. I am ADONAI your

Numbers 15:37-41

When there is a minyan, the leader says:
 God—truly—

AND ITS BLESSINGS

וְהָיָה אִם-שָׁמַעַתְּ תִשְׁמָעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוָּה
 אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם לְאַהֲבָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעֲבֹדוֹ בְּכָל-
 לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם: וְנָתַתִּי מִטְר-אֶרְצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֵה
 וּמִלְקוֹשׁ וְאֶסְפַּת דְּגָנְךָ וְתִירְשֶׁךָ וְיִצְהַרְךָ: וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב
 בְּשָׂדֶךָ לְבֹהֶמְתֶּךָ וְאָכְלָתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ: הִשְׁמָרוּ לָכֶם פְּרִיפְתָהּ
 לְבַבְכֶם וְסִרְתֶּם וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם
 לָהֶם: וְחָרָה אַף-יְהוָה בָּכֶם וְעָצַר אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה
 מִטֶּר וְהִיאֲדָמָה לֹא תִתֶּן אֶת-יְבוּלָהּ וְאֶבַדְתֶּם מְהֵרָה מֵעַל
 הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה נָתַן לָכֶם: וְשָׂמַתֶּם אֶת-דִּבְרֵי
 אֱלֹהֵי עַל-לְבַבְכֶם וְעַל-נַפְשְׁכֶם וּקְשַׁרְתֶּם אֹתָם לְאוֹת
 עַל-יְדֵיכֶם וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם: וְלִמְדַתֶּם אֹתָם
 אֶת-פְּנֵיכֶם לְדַבֵּר בָּם בְּשִׁבְתְּכֶם בְּבֵיתְכֶם וּבְלִכְתְּכֶם בְּדֶרֶךְ
 וּבְשִׁכְבְּכֶם וּבְקוּמְכֶם: וְכִתַּבְתֶּם עַל-מְזוֹזוֹת בֵּיתְכֶם וּבִשְׁעָרֵיכֶם:
 לְמַעַן יִרְבוּ יְמֵיכֶם וְיָמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁפַּע
 יְהוָה לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם לָתֵת לָהֶם בְּיָמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל-הָאָרֶץ:

דברים יא:יג-כא

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
 וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם וַעֲשׂוּ לָהֶם צִיצִית עַל-פְּנֵי בְגָדֵיהֶם
 לְדֹרֹתָם וְנָתַנוּ עַל-צִיצִית הַפָּנֶף פֶּתִיל תְּכֵלֶת: וְהָיָה
 לָכֶם לְצִיצִית וּרְאִיתֶם אוֹתוֹ וּזְכַרְתֶּם אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹת יְהוָה
 וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְלֹא תִתּוּרוּ אַחֲרֵי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם
 אֲשֶׁר-אַתֶּם זִנִּים אַחֲרֵיהֶם: לְמַעַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם
 אֶת-כָּל-מִצְוֹתַי וְהָיִיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים לֵאלֹהֵיכֶם: אֲנִי יְהוָה
 אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִי אֶתְכֶם מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְהוֹדוֹת
 לָכֶם לֵאלֹהִים אֲנִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם:

במדבר טו:לו-מא

אמת

When there is a minyan, the leader says:

— יהוה אלהיכם — אמת —

12

IF YOU WILL HEAR אִם-שָׁמַעַתְּ. This description of re-
 ward and punishment has
 been a source of theologi-
 cal struggle for every Jewish
 generation, including those
 of the biblical era itself, and
 many Reform and some
 Reconstructionist congre-
 gations omit this paragraph.
 While our life experience
 often belies a belief in di-
 rect and immediate reward
 and punishment, in reciting
 this passage we may open
 ourselves to the suggestion
 that the consequences of
 our moral and immoral
 behavior resound in the
 world—though in ways
 that we may not grasp
 and that are beyond our
 comprehension. Jews, who
 have seen empires come
 and go, are witnesses to
 the inner decay wrought by
 corruption, injustice, and
 unbounded power.

ADONAI SAID TO MOSES
 וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה. The
 ancient rabbis emphasized
 that the last words of this
 paragraph, about remem-
 bering the exodus from
 Egypt, are the prime reason
 for its inclusion in the
 Sh'ma. In Jewish theology,
 the exodus anticipates the
 redemption in the future:
 true freedom. The means of
 achieving redemption, we
 are taught here, is remem-
 bering our responsibility to
 live lives that are holy.

NOT BE SEDUCED BY YOUR
 EYES AND HEART וְלֹא תִתּוּרוּ

אַחֲרֵי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם. The sages
 comment that it is the heart that di-
 rects the eyes. What we see depends
 on our perspective, our point of view.

BE HOLY וְהָיִיתֶם קְדוֹשִׁים. This is the es-
 sence of the Torah: to lead a holy life.

SPOURS LEV SHALEM

"If You Will Hear": An Interpretive Translation

If you faithfully obey My laws today, and love Me, I shall give you your livelihood in good time and in full measure. You shall work and reap the results of your labor, satisfied with what you have achieved. Be careful, however. Let not your heart be seduced, lured after false goals, seeking alien ideals, lest God's image depart from you and you sink, becoming desolate, and lose your joyous, God-given heritage.

—ANDRÉ UNGAR

God's Anger

The prophets never thought that God's anger is something that cannot be accounted for, unpredictable, irrational. It is never a spontaneous outburst, but a reaction occasioned by the conduct of man.... Man's sense of injustice is a poor analogy to God's sense of injustice. The exploitation of the poor is to us a misdemeanor; to God, it is a disaster. Our reaction is disapproval; God's reaction is something no language can convey. Is it a sign of cruelty that God's anger is aroused when the rights of the poor are violated, when widows and orphans are oppressed? . . . There is an evil which most of us condone and are even guilty of: indifference to evil. We remain neutral, impartial, and not easily moved by the wrongs done unto other people. Indifference to evil is more insidious than evil itself.

—ABRAHAM JOSHUA HESCHEL

A Thread of Blue

A thread of blue—blue like the sea, blue like the sky, blue like the color of the divine throne.

—SIFREI NUMBERS

If you will hear and obey the mitzvot that I command you this day, to love and serve ADONAI your God with all your heart and all your soul, then I will grant the rain for your land in season, rain in autumn and rain in spring. You shall gather in your grain and wine and oil; I will provide grass in your fields for your cattle and you shall eat and be satisfied. Take care lest your heart be tempted, and you stray and serve other gods and bow to them. Then ADONAI's anger will flare up against you, and God will close up the sky so that there will be no rain and the earth will not yield its produce. You will quickly disappear from the good land that ADONAI is giving you. Therefore, impress these words of mine upon your heart and upon your soul. Bind them as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol above your eyes; teach them to your children, by speaking of them when you sit in your home, when you walk on your way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. Inscribe them upon the doorposts of your home and on your gates. Then your days and the days of your children, on the land that ADONAI swore to your ancestors to give them, will be as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.

Deuteronomy 11:13-21

ADONAI said to Moses: Speak to the people Israel, and instruct them that in every generation they shall put *tzitzit* on the corners of their garments, placing a thread of blue on the *tzitzit*, the fringe of each corner. That shall be your *tzitzit*; you shall look at it and remember all the mitzvot of ADONAI, and fulfill them, and not be seduced by your eyes and heart as they lead you astray. Then you will remember and fulfill all My mitzvot, and be holy before your God. I am ADONAI your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to be your God. I am ADONAI your God—

Numbers 15:37-41

Truly

When there is a minyan, the leader says:

► ADONAI your God—truly—

13

וְהָיָה אֲשֶׁר אֶנְכִּי מְצִוֶּה
אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעַבְדּוֹ בְּכָל-
וְטֶרֶאֶרְצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יוֹרֶה
וְיִצְהָרָה: וְנָתַתִּי עֵשֶׂב
תָּ: הַשָּׂמֶרֶי לָכֶם פֶּן יִפְתָּה
ס אַחֲרָיִם וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם
ר אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא־יִהְיֶה
לָהּ וְאֲבַדְתֶּם מִהָרָה מֵעַל
כֶּם: וְשִׁמַּתֶּם אֶת־דְּבָרִי
קִשְׁרֹתֶם אֹתָם לְאוֹת
יֵכֶם: וּלְמִדַּתֶּם אֹתָם
בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבְלֶכְתְּךָ בְּדֶרֶךְ
לְמִזְוֹנוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ:
עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע
יְיָ הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל־הָאָרֶץ:

דברים יא: יג-כא

דָּבָר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
תַּעֲלִפְנֶנְכִּי בְּגִדֵיהֶם
פָּתִיל תִּכְלֹת: וְהָיָה
יָתֵם אֶת־כָּל־מִצְוַת יְהוָה
רִי לְבַבְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵי עֵינֵיכֶם
עַן תִּזְכְּרוּ וַעֲשִׂיתֶם
ז לְאֱלֹהֵיכֶם: אֲנִי יְהוָה
מֵאֲרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְהָיוֹת

במדבר טו: לו-מא

אמת

When there is a minyan, the le

אֱלֹהֵיכֶם - אֱמֶת -

Seder Eret

"... which I command you (*etkhem*) this day." All was created by the twenty-two letters of the Torah [from *aleph* to *tav*, the first two letters of *etkhem*] and every Jew contains an imprint of those letters that belong to him. All Israel contain the twenty-two letters. These letters are renewed each day in their various permutations. So "which I command you" can also be read as "which I command the twenty-two letters within you."

If Israel merit this renewal, all of Creation is blessed for them. Thus: "I will put grass in your field" (Deut. 13:15) and so forth. And this is [the conclusion of the passage] "like the days of heaven upon the earth" (Deut. 13:21). "Days" refers to spiritual lights. As long as heavenly "days" shine upon the earth and can be revealed in the world, Israel will continue to inherit the land.

5:49

How is it that we are capable of hearing God's word? What is it about the human being that gives us the consciousness with which to respond to the divine command? The hasidic tradition answers that it is the Torah within us, the divine letters implanted within the human soul, that respond to those same letters when they rearrange themselves as divine commandment. The voice of Torah beyond calls forth to the Torah within. Our response brings about a renewal of life that affects not only us but all the world around us.

2

"If you surely listen to My commandments... to serve Him with all your heart" (Deut. 11:13). RaSHI comments that one should not study in order to become wealthy or to be called "rabbi" [or for any other extraneous reason], but only out of love.

The verse then means that the purpose of the commandments is to come to the love of God. How is it possible for a person to love his Creator [given the vast difference between God and humans]? The philosophers also ask how a com-

mandment can apply in the case of love of its own accord. They asked this however, but because they were lacking, rael love is aroused through the commandment.

In the *Sefer ha-Yashar* of Rabbenu Yonah, love of God is the lover becoming like God. When God sanctified us through His ways, and when we make our ways attached to Him. "Become attached to the commandment" is thus called because it is attachment, as in the verse: "They are attached" (Prov. 1:9).

God's giving us the mitzvot was arranged so that we were able to offer Israel merit that we were lacking. The commandments, in order that we might become like our Creator. The 613 commandments, 248 limbs and 365 sinews in the person, all are for the love of God. . . .

"Do all for the sake of love!" is a commandment of the mystics throughout the world. Each person has a longing in its own garb; here in the world, which is much centered on laws and commandments, the sage that could be read and appreciated, the one who experienced the love of God and the love of the beloved to the One. In Judaism, it is the commandments themselves that play this role. The tension between "love" and "law." How can the commandments in all their finest detail serve as paths to love?

3

When commanding the blessing after the meal, "you will eat and be sated. The Lord your God will bless you" (Deut. 11:15-16). For "a person rebels only when he does not love" that [the verse] "you will eat and be sated."

'etkhem) this day." All was cre-
of the Torah [from aleph to tav,
and every Jew contains an im-
g to him. All Israel contain the
rs are renewed each day in their
ch I command you" can also be
twenty-two letters within you."
all of Creation is blessed for
n your field" (Deut. 13:15) and
usion of the passage] "like the
(Deut. 13:21). "Days" refers to
avenly "days" shine upon the
e world, Israel will continue to

5:49

of hearing God's word? What is
it gives us the consciousness
divine command? The hasidic
e Torah within us, the divine
human soul, that respond to
earrange themselves as divine
brah beyond calls forth to the
igs about a renewal of life that
world around us.

mandments . . . to serve Him
 .3). RaSHI comments that one
 come wealthy or to be called
 eous reason], but only out of

he purpose of the command-
 : God. How is it possible for a
 n the vast difference between
 sophers also ask how a com-

mandment can apply in the case of love, if the soul doesn't
 love of its own accord. They asked this not out of wisdom,
 however, but because they were lacking in commands. In Is-
 rael love is aroused through the commandments.

In the *Sefer ha-Yashar* of Rabbenu Tam it says that the root
 of love is the lover becoming like unto the beloved. Thus
 when God sanctified us through His commandments and
 ways, and when we make our ways and deeds like His, we be-
 come attached to Him. "Become attached to His ways"; the
 mitsvah is thus called because it indicates joining and at-
 tachment, as in the verse: "They are a joining of grace . . ."
 (Prov. 1:9).

God's giving us the mitsvot was an act of unearned love. It
 was to offer Israel merit that we were given so much of teach-
 ings and commandments, in order that we purify our deeds to
 become like our Creator. The 613 commandments purify the
 248 limbs and 365 sinews in the person. In this way we attain
 the love of God. . . .

5:50f.

"Do all for the sake of love!" is a cry heard from the lips of
mystics throughout the world. Each tradition clothes this
longing in its own garb; here in the heart of a Judaism very
much centered on laws and commandments, we find a pas-
sage that could be read and appreciated by anyone who has
experienced the love of God and the attraction that ever draws
the beloved to the One. In Judaism it is the commandments
themselves that play this role. There is no tension here be-
tween "love" and "law." How can there be, when the mitsvot
in all their finest detail serve as pathways to the love of God?

3

When commanding the blessing after meals, the Torah says:
 " . . . you will eat and be sated. Take care lest . . . " (Deut.
 11:15-16). For "a person rebels only when sated." So it appears
 that [the verse] "you will eat and be sated and bless the Lord

J.O.S.

Deuteronomy

עקב

your God always keeps His eye, from year's beginning to year's end.

¹³If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and serving Him with all your heart and soul, ¹⁴I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall

אתה תמיד עיני יהוה אלהיך בזה מרשית השנה ועד אחרית שנה: ס
¹³ והיה אם שמעו תשמעו אל מצותי אשר אנכי מצוה אתכם היום לאהבה את יהוה אלהיכם ולעבדו בכל לבבכם ובכל נפשכם: ¹⁴ ונתתי

v. 12. חסר אל"ף

12. always The translation, construing "always" as part of the second clause, follows the Masoretic cantillation. However, it is superfluous in the second clause, which contains a phrase meaning the same thing, "from the year's beginning to year's end." In the Hebrew text "always" follows "looks after" in the first clause, and it should be construed as part of that clause, modifying "looks after." Although this seems like a minor point, it indicates that the verse is constructed in synonymous parallelism, in other words, that it is quasi-poetic, like the description of the promised land in 8:7-9. These poetic descriptions show how much Deuteronomy cherishes the land.

on which the LORD . . . always keeps His eye On which God's attention is always focused.²⁶ Commentators disagree whether Moses is using this idiom to mean benevolent concern²⁷ or judgmental scrutiny.²⁸ In its benevolent sense, the idiom normally takes the preposition *'el* or *'al*. Our verse, however, uses the preposition *be-*, which is paralleled only in Amos 9:8, where the context is punitive: God's eyes are turned against the sinful kingdom. Here in Deuteronomy the meaning is undoubtedly favorable, as indicated by the poetic style of the verse. However, the preposition *be-* seems to alert the audience to the message of the coming verses: God's protection is conditional upon Israel's conduct (vv. 13-17).

from year's beginning to year's end God is attentive to the land in every season, "seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter" (Gen. 8:22).

13-21. Here Moses draws the conclusion from the facts he describes in verses 10-12. Since the land of Israel is watered by God, rainfall is conditional upon obedience to Him. In verses 13-17 Moses describes the benefits that will follow upon obedience and the harmful consequences of disobedience. Then, in verses 18-20, he stresses the value of learning and teaching God's commands, and in verse 21 he concludes with a promise of long tenure in the land as a result of obedience. As Abravanel put it: "You will not prosper in that land by your own strength and ability, for the commandments are the sole method of cultivating it."²⁹ These nine verses express the effect of the commandments so concisely and clearly that they were later prescribed as part of the daily recitation of the Shema, expressing "acceptance of the yoke of the commandments." See Excursus 9.

13. serving Him with all your heart In halakhic exegesis this clause is taken to show that prayer is required by the Torah: "What service is with the heart? It is prayer."³⁰

14. I will grant Compare verse 15, "I will provide." In both cases Moses is speaking in God's name. See Comment to 7:4, "from Me."³¹

rain . . . in season Promises of rainfall often indicate that it will come in the proper season, since for agricultural purposes rain in the wrong season is useless, at times even harmful.³²

Contrary to common belief, the amount of rainfall in agricultural areas in . . . Israel is no less than in agricultural countries in the temperate zones. The difference lies not in the annual amount of rain, but in the number of rainy days and in the intensity of rain per hour or per day. In . . . Israel the entire annual amount falls in 40 to 60 days in a season of seven to eight months. In temperate climates precipitation occurs on 180 days spread over 12 months.³³

Hence timing is all-important. In Israel, the first showers, known as the *yoreh*, fall intermittently in October and November. They soften the soil, which is hardened and cracked from the summer, and permit farmers to begin plowing and sowing. The rain increases from December through February, with about seventy percent of the year's rain normally falling in these months. The final showers, or *malkosh* ("late rain"), come in April or early May, right before the final burst of growth of the grain

gather in your new grain and wine and oil—¹⁵I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill. ¹⁶Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. ¹⁷For the LORD's anger will flare up against you, and He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the LORD is assigning to you.

¹⁸Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, ¹⁹and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up;

מִטֶּר-אֲרָצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ יֵרֶה וּמִלְקוֹשׁ וְאִסְפַּת דִּגְנְךָ
וְתִירְשֶׁךָ וְיִצְהַרְךָ: ¹⁵ וְנָתַתִּי עֵשָׂב בְּשָׂדֶךָ
לִבְהֶמְתֶּךָ וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבַעְתָּ: ¹⁶ הִשְׁמָרוּ לָכֶם פֶּן
יִפְתֶּה לְבַבְכֶם וְסָרְתֶם וְעַבַדְתֶּם אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים
וְהִשְׁתַּחֲוִיתֶם לָהֶם: ¹⁷ וְחָרָה אַף-יְהוָה בְּכֶם וְעָצַר
אֶת-הַשָּׁמַיִם וְלֹא-יִהְיֶה מָטָר וְהָאֲדָמָה לֹא תֵתֵן
אֶת-יְבוּלָהּ וְאֲבַדְתֶּם מְהֵרָה מֵעַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה
אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה נָתַן לָכֶם:

¹⁸ וְשִׁמְתֶם אֶת-דִּבְרֵי אֵלֶּה עַל-לִבְבְּכֶם וְעַל-
נֶפֶשְׁכֶם וְקִשְׁרְתֶם אֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֵיכֶם וְהָיוּ
לְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם: ¹⁹ וְלִמַּדְתֶּם אֹתָם אֶת-

and are crucial for its maturation. If the early or late rains come too soon or are delayed, this can unduly lengthen or shorten the growing season and stunt the growth of the grain, impede the harvest, or cause it to rot.³⁴ The talmudic treatise *Ta'anit* prescribes fasting if the rain is delayed, and it observes that rain falling after the normal rainy season was considered a curse.³⁵

gather This verb does not refer to harvesting but to bringing crops in from the field for processing, and to gathering in the processed products for storage.³⁶

15. I will provide grass . . . for your cattle—and thus you shall eat Commentators have speculated on how these two clauses are related. According to one approach, the point is that well-fed cattle will plow better, thus increasing the harvest, or will be fatter and provide more meat.³⁷ The hyphens in the translation imply that the two clauses are not related, but that “you shall eat” refers back to the produce mentioned in verse 15.³⁸ The talmudic sage Rav construed the conjunction *ve-* (here rendered “thus”) in its sense of “then” and inferred from the sequence of the clauses that the verse is concerned with kindness to animals, indicating that one must feed one’s cattle before feeding oneself.³⁹

16–17. As in 6:12 and 8:11, the promise “you shall eat your fill” is followed by a warning to “take care” not to be led astray by satiety to forget YHVH and worship other gods. The text must have in mind the Canaanite *ba'als*. These were local forms of Hadad (his epithet “Baal” means “lord, master”),⁴⁰ the deity whom Canaanites believed responsible for rain and agricultural fertility.⁴¹ The Israelites lived among peoples who saw the control of the world as divided among many independent divine powers. Gods of fertility were especially prominent and their lure was a recurrent challenge to monotheism. When the Israelites left the desert and settled in Canaan, some must have reasoned that the Canaanites’ gods were responsible for the land’s fertility, since the Canaanites had successfully practiced agriculture before the Israelites arrived. This thinking is vividly described—and rejected—in Hosea 2:4–19. One of the most celebrated episodes in the struggle against this temptation came in the days of Ahab, when YHVH first withheld rain and finally granted it when Elijah confronted the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel. In this way He showed that only He, and not Baal, controls the rain (1 Kings 17–18; cf. Jer. 14:22). In our passage, as the Israelites prepare to settle in a land where they will adopt a new, agricultural way of life, Moses forewarns them that rain and fertility are given by God in return for obedience, and that if the Israelites should turn to false gods, He will withhold these gifts, causing the Israelites to perish from the land.

16. be lured See Comment to 4:19.

18–21. Consequently, the Israelites should remind themselves of God’s teachings so as to obey them and avoid a disastrous fate. The reminders are those prescribed in 6:6–9.

18. your very heart Rather, “your heart and soul.” See Comment to 6:5.

bind them See Comment to 6:8.

²⁰and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates—²¹to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.

²²If, then, you faithfully keep all this Instruction that I command you, loving the LORD your God, walking in all His ways, and holding fast to Him, ²³the LORD will dislodge before you all these nations: you will dispossess nations greater and more numerous than you. ²⁴Every spot on which your foot treads shall be yours; your territory shall extend from the wilderness to the Lebanon and from the River—the Euphrates—to the Western Sea. ²⁵No man shall stand up to you: the LORD your God will put the dread and the fear of you over the whole land in which you set foot, as He promised you.

בְּנִיכֶם לְדָבָר בָּם בְּשַׁבְתֶּךָ בְּבֵיתְךָ וּבִלְכַתְּךָ
בְּדֶרֶךְ וּבְשֹׁכְכֶךָ וּבְקוֹמֶךָ: ²⁰ וּבְתַבְתֶּם עַל-
מַזוּזוֹת בֵּיתְךָ וּבְשַׁעְרֶיךָ: ²¹ לְמַעַן יִרְבּוּ יְמֵיכֶם
וְיָמֵי בְנֵיכֶם עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע יְהוָה
לְאַבְתֵּיכֶם לֵאמֹר לְהֵם בְּיָמֵי הַשָּׁמַיִם עַל-
הָאָרֶץ: ^ס שְׂבִיעִי וּמִפְטִיר
²² כִּי אִם-שָׁמַר תִּשְׁמְרוּן אֶת-כָּל-הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת
אֲשֶׁר אֲנֹכִי מִצְוֶה אֲתֶם לַעֲשׂוֹתָהּ לְאַהֲבָהּ אֶת-
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם לְלַבֵּת בְּכָל-דֶּרֶכְכֶּיךָ וּלְדַבְקָהּ-בּוֹ:
²³ וְהוֹרִישׁ יְהוָה אֶת-כָּל-הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה מִלְּפָנֶיכֶם
וְיִרְשָׁתֶם גּוֹיִם גְּדֹלִים וְעַצְמִים מִכֶּם: ²⁴ כָּל-הַמָּקוֹם
אֲשֶׁר תֵּדְרֹךְ בְּיַדְּגֻלְכֶם בּוֹ לָכֶם יְהִי מִן-הַמִּדְבָּר
וְהַלְבָנוֹן מִן-הַנָּהָר נְהַר-פָּרָת וְעַד הַיָּם הָאֲחֵרֹן
יְהִי גְבֻלְכֶם: ²⁵ לֹא-יִתְנָצֵב אִישׁ בְּפָנֶיכֶם פֶּחַדְכֶם
וּמֹרָאֲכֶם יִתֵּן | יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם עַל-פָּנֶי כָל-הָאָרֶץ
אֲשֶׁר תֵּדְרֹכֶנָּה בְּאִשׁ דָּבָר לָכֶם: ^ס

20. *inscribe them* See Comment to 6:9.

21. *as long as there is a heaven over the earth* That is, forever. The sky and other heavenly bodies symbolize longevity and permanence.⁴²

OBEDIENCE TO GOD WILL ENSURE A SUCCESSFUL CONQUEST OF THE PROMISED LAND (vv. 22–25)

In this paragraph Moses develops the first conclusion mentioned in the first paragraph (v. 8), promising that if Israel obeys and loves God, God Himself will dispossess the Canaanites and enable Israel to succeed them. This paragraph caps the argument of 11:1–21. It also casts a new light on the promise of victory uttered in 9:1–2 by making it clear that everything promised in chapters 9–11 is conditional.

24. *Every spot on which your foot treads shall be yours* This wording may reflect the ancient practice of formally acquiring title to land by walking through it.⁴³

your territory shall extend from . . . Since the point of this verse is that God is giving Israel the entire promised land, from one end to the other, only its extremities are named: the deserts in the south, the Lebanon and the Euphrates in the north, and the Mediterranean on the west. The unmentioned eastern boundary, the Jordan, is implicit in the fact that the Israelites are about to cross it to enter the land (e.g., 11:8). For details on this conception of the boundaries see Comment to 1:7 (which also mentions the land's main internal divisions).

the Western Sea Literally, the “hind” or “rear” sea. The geographic orientation of the ancient western Semites was not toward the north, as in modern cartography, but the east. Hence one set of terms for the four points of the compass expresses “east” by “forward” (*kedem*), “west” by “behind” (*‘ahor*), “north” by “left” (*semo’l*), and “south” by “right” (*yamin, teiman*).

25. *dread . . . and fear* Compare 2:25; 7:23.

as He promised you See Exodus 23:26–31; Deuteronomy 7:19–24.⁴⁴

To pluck out the eyes of the Lord (Times of Israel)

Rabbi David Seidenberg

The second Torah portion after Tisha B'Av, called *Eikev*, concentrates all the contradictions between ethnocentric nationalism and humanism into just a few chapters. *Eikev*, more than any other section of the Torah, is our source for the concept of the "promised land". But contrary to popular belief, the Torah teaches that it is a privilege to live in the holy land, not a right – a privilege that can be revoked when people abuse either the land or other human beings.

Losing the privilege to be in *Eretz Yisrael*, the land of Israel, is linked to the ecology of the land. The Torah praises Canaan as "a land of mountains and valleys". Only "through the rain of the heavens will she drink water." (Deut 11:11) "She is not like the land of Egypt, which . . . you gave drink with your foot (by pumping water from the Nile), like a garden of greens" (Deut 11:10). By the same token, this land is also not like the garden of Eden, for the garden of Eden was watered by four rivers, and was the source of those rivers. A land that must drink from the heavens is a precarious land, a land where people can't control irrigation and are completely dependent on rainfall, a land that is subject to drought. How then could this be the ideal, the promised land?

And yet it is, the Torah tells us, and the sign of this is that the "the eyes of YHVH the Lord your God are on her always" (Deut 11:12). This mystical-sounding relationship with the divine is simpler than it sounds: it means that God is continually assessing whether the people merit rain. Canaan is not like the land of Egypt, which can go for centuries sustained by the flooding of the Nile and the technology of the pedal pump, no matter the state of the weather or the state of justice, until it finally gets its proverbial seven years of famine or its ten all-consuming plagues. Unlike Egypt, the feedback loop in Canaan is short and swift – the loop may be closed, the consequences felt, within a season or two.

It's clear that this is the intended meaning from the passage that follows, which we recite as the second paragraph of the *Shma* prayer. *Eikev* means "consequence", and this paragraph describes the calamitous weather that is the consequence of not listening to the covenant: "the heavens will be shut up and there will be no rain, and the land will not give her produce, and you will be destroyed from off the good land which YHVH gives you."

This paradoxically is what attracted our ancestors to Canaan: it was a place where they could experience the immediacy of God's judgment, and hence God's presence. It is this very fact – that our tenure is tenuous – that makes Canaan/Israel a holy land.

This idea that bad weather could be moral payback for our sins seemed outdated to enlightened people for a few centuries. Today, however, when we face global climate disruption due to

warming, the idea that our actions have consequences on an ecosystem-wide scale is imbued with reality.

It's not too much of a leap from there to Leviticus 26, where the sin of not letting the land rest invites God's judgment and ensuing environmental disaster. But in Deuteronomy 10, it is our sins against other people that God is weighing. One commandment in particular is singled out for mention: "Love the stranger, for you were strangers in Egypt" (Deut 10:19) The reason given is that we worship the God "who makes justice for orphan and widow, and who loves the stranger, giving him bread and raiment." (Deut 10:18)

Taken together, the Torah warns us that not just our environmental sins, but our moral failings, injustice to the poor, failure to love the stranger, as well as idolatry, all leave a toxic residue—most toxic especially in this land that is promised—a residue that can only be washed away with the destruction of human society.

We have spent centuries developing technology to make ourselves as impervious as Egypt to such consequences, to blind the eyes of God, so to speak. Whether in places like California or in Israel, we use modern equivalents of pedal pump technology to control our food supply, substitute petroleum-based fertilizers for healthy soil, outlast drought by pumping out aquifers. However, as we learn from climate change, technology doesn't eliminate the consequences of our actions. It only defers them, and the more they are deferred, the wider the consequences will be.

Similarly, Israel and the U.S., like many nations, try to make themselves impervious to human threats using military technology. But when a society is decayed on the inside by oppression, as the death of so many African-Americans at the hands of police shows in the U.S., military-style weapons only worsen the problem. Today, the toxic residue of oppression has been building and building in that long-ago promised land of Canaan, the land some people call the West Bank, others call Palestine, and still others Judea and Samaria, *Yehudah v'Shomron*.

A few years back, I got a clear picture of this residue on a tour with Rabbis for Human Rights. We glimpsed Palestinian life in the northern West Bank. Here were the mountains and hills praised in the Torah, the olive groves in the valleys the rain would flow into. But the tour, which included *kanafeh* pastry in Nablus, also included views of Palestinian olive groves burned down by Israeli settlers.

What really shook me, though, was something that may sound minor. As we sped south down the highway en route to the Hebron hills (where the village of Susiya is being squeezed out of existence), we passed a bus shelter for a settlement called Yizhar, the likely source of the grove-burning settlers. There was a resident of Yizhar in the shelter, tall and skinny, yarmulke visible

from a hundred yards away, *tzitzit* flying. He wasn't just sitting there, though. The moment he saw a Palestinian vehicle coming towards him, he stood up to give it—us—the middle finger, not relieving his finger til we were well past the shelter. I asked our Palestinian driver to slow down so I could take this man's picture. Instead, the driver sped up. The look of terror on his face told me everything I needed to know about the extremist settlers in Yizhar.

I wish *Eikev* were taken to heart as a warning by these West Bank settlers. Instead, it is their inspiration, because in *Eikev* the Israelites are told to drive the Canaanite inhabitants off the land. Never mind that the rabbis clearly ruled that those laws didn't apply any more even in their own time, let alone ours. Neither *Eikev's* warnings nor its exhortation to circumcise our hearts inspire them to love the neighbor who is a stranger. Instead, the rule of the extremists seems to be *n'kamah*, vengeance, to do to others what is hateful to yourself.

Why can they get away with this? In essence, just as in the case of other sins against human beings and the Earth, the state with its military might—its technology—defers the consequences of the extremists' sins. Protected by the military, they pluck out the eyes of the Lord, unafraid of the price that might be paid.

If you sympathize with the settlers, you might now be going over the litany of terrorist acts by Palestinians, the wave of stabbings, the murder of a girl in her sleep. You would be right not to forget those things. But what you should also remember is that treating the land as an idol while burning down its trees is the quintessential toxin: denuding the earth, violating the Torah command not to destroy fruit trees even in war, treating the stranger to you as anathema, doing to others what you yourself would hate, and on top of that idolatry.

Would the kind of people who burn olive groves also burn houses with human beings inside? Just over a year ago, the Dawabsheh family's home in Duma, near Nablus, was firebombed and most of the family killed. Then in December, there was the vile wedding where settlers stabbed pictures of Ali Dawabsheh, the baby who died. And then in March, the home of the one Palestinian witness to the attack caught fire. Incidents like these are strongly condemned by Israelis of every party, yet the conditions that make them inevitable don't change.

Are there any left who truly love the land? Love it enough not to pollute it with blood? I look to a different kind of settler and extremist, Rabbi Menachem Froman. z"l, of Tekoa, who supported human rights as well as the national rights of Palestinians, who met with anyone and everyone, who saw strangers as sisters and brothers, and I look to the settlers who are carrying on his work with like-minded Palestinians. These are the people who envision themselves living together in peace on the land they love, without regard to which flag is flying. Who pay each other condolences and plant trees together. Who recognize that military and technology can't blind our God forever. Our God whose eyes must even now be weeping.

Abundance and retribution: parashat Ekev

This week's Torah portion (Parashat Ekev) has great stuff in it -- including what most Jews know as the second paragraph of the Shema, which begins:

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving Adonai your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late...

(That's the first verse, Deuteronomy 11:13; the passage runs through 11:21. You can find it in Hebrew alongside slightly antiquated English by scrolling slightly on [this page](#).) If you grew up Reform, you may not recognize Deut. 11:13-22 as part of the Shema -- indeed, you may not realize the Shema extends past the first paragraph. The original Reform liturgy excised the latter two paragraphs; my 1960 edition of the *Union Prayer Book* skips them altogether, and they weren't in *Gates of Prayer* when I was in high school, either.

I suspect the early Reform liturgists were troubled by the direct causality of the traditional prayer's second paragraph. Drought and famine are equal-opportunity tragedies, and who could countenance an understanding of God which holds that lack of rain is God's punishment for idolatry?

It's not only the *Reformim* who wrestle with this one; the Reconstructionist *siddur Kol Haneshamah* offers several options for the second paragraph of the shema, among them Deut. 28:1-6 and 30:15-19 -- though it also offers the traditional passage, noting that though the traditional text offers a "supernatural theology that many contemporary Jews find difficult," our awareness of how we ourselves can use and abuse the environment allows us to recognize that this reward and punishment may rest in our own hands.

The liturgical pendulum continues to swing: the passage will be restored to the new Reform siddur, due later this year, and it's long been a part of the homegrown prayerbook that my congregation uses. In ours the Hebrew is paired with two different English-language variants. We use the literal translation at morning services, and at evening services an interpretive translation which begins,

If you will listen to Me and know the way to treat each other lovingly that I give you this day, you will be rewarded with fulfillment and always know who you are. You will gather blessings in your life. There will be sustenance for your spirit...

We're not alone in translating the passage in a range of ways. Rabbi Arthur Waskow argues passionately for its multiplicity of meanings. He observes that

in this part of the shema, the Hebrew speaks to a plural audience (unlike in the earlier part of the prayer, which is singular), and that it resonates on a social or communal level in ways it might not resonate for individuals. His translation begins,

If you listen, REALLY listen to the teachings of YHWH, the Breath of Life, especially the teaching that there is Unity in the world and inter-connection among all its parts, then the rains will fall as they should, the rivers will run, the heavens will smile, and the good earth will feed you...

Regardless of how the passage is translated or interpreted, there always comes the pivotal "but." If we fail to follow the mitzvot -- if we are disobedient and idolatrous -- if we (in Reb Waskow's terms) "shatter the harmony of life" -- then bad things will happen. And that's the part of the passage that seems to be a sticking-point for many contemporary liberal Jews. We don't want to reduce the Infinite to a disciplinarian, and we don't like the theodicy encoded in the apparent arrow of causality between disobedience and famine.

That's why I think we need to read this passage metaphorically, and to invert the causality we're accustomed to seeing in it. Forget the simplistic understanding which suggests that God is waiting, drought in hand, to smack down unbelievers. This text points to the truth that when we elevate pride or property over God we cut sustenance out of our own lives. In succumbing to the lure of idolatry, we turn away from the source of sustenance which would otherwise be present in our lives; we make the scarcity manifest for ourselves.

For me the reward, and the punishment, are both metaphorical. Torah isn't talking about literal grain in literal fields. Try reading it, instead, as speaking of the wildflower meadows and abundant cornucopias of the human heart. Then the beginning of the Shema becomes an exhortation to be mindful of the Unity underlying creation -- and the second paragraph reminds us how fragile and precious our sense of sustenance is, and how much it depends on our willingness to (as it is written) revere the Infinite, walk in paths of holiness, and commit our hearts and souls to loving and serving the Source from Which we come.

Rabbi Rachel Berenblat

Eric Selinger said...

Although I've heard this metaphorical reading before, and found it comforting, I must confess I don't find it all that satisfying today. Maybe it's because so much else in the parasha is harder to stomach or explain away--"You shall destroy all the peoples that the Lord your God delivers to you, showing them no pity," or this giddy promise from the Haftarah: "I will make your oppressors eat their own flesh, / They shall be drunk with their own blood as with wine." Or maybe it's just because I'm not sure I entirely believe even the

allegory, since I know plenty of folks who aren't in touch with the Source of All, at least in any conscious way, who live pretty wonderful and generous lives.

I prefer my own Rabbi's premise: because it is a fully human document, not "divinely inspired" but human all the way down, Torah doesn't tell us anything, really, about God, but it tells us almost everything we might need to know about ourselves. I read this parasha as a series of longings: the longing for an orderly, coherent world, where droughts and famine make sense as punishment; the longing for an orderly, coherent self, one that's focused and controlled and able to resist "temptation" and entanglement with the Other; the longing for power, infinite power, in the face of very real enemies, human and otherwise. These are all mixed up, as they always are, with many good things: longings to feel gratitude, awe, even love (you must love the stranger). The text doesn't recognize the difference between these various desires; we do, and we have an obligation, as we, read, to sift and quarrel, to be sickened and pleased, and to put those responses into action and words of our own.

Pardon the sermon!

E