

Ekev Davar Torah – Aug. 20, 2022

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Eikev is a continuation of Moshe's speeches that make up the first part of sefer D'varim. Like the two preceding parshiyot, it contains promises of prosperity should the people keep the covenant and warnings of doom should they not. It reviews details of the Exodus and the previous 40 years' history. It is full of advice and details regarding the people's imminent entrance into the land.

Highlights of Eikev include the commandment to bentsch after meals, a listing of the seven species, a review of the giving of the torah and the golden calf incident, and the second paragraph of the sh'ma. (It also has murderous hornets. If you'd like to learn more about what the sources had to say about them, come find me at kiddush!)

While all of this provides quite decent material for a drash, as I prepared for today I found my thoughts repeatedly turning to Moshe himself and the bigger picture of his final speeches.

Moshe has led an extraordinary life by any measure. He is born to slaves, adopted into a royal family and raised as a prince until he discovers his true roots. He is forced into exile, becomes a shepherd, and raises a family. Then, when most people would be preparing for retirement, he is suddenly called back into danger and into the limelight. He confronts Pharaoh repeatedly, brings about the downfall of a great nation, and then leads a people into freedom and through a desert for 40 years. And all of that is not even the most extraordinary part. The most extraordinary part is Moshe's relationship with God, an intimate, personal, and complex relationship in which there is the ultimate power differential and yet also a sense of partnership.

Nevertheless, during all these months when we have followed Moshe's life, from Sh'mot until now, we have rarely heard his own words.

וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: דַּבֵּר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ אֲלֵהֶם

And God said to Moses, speak to the people and tell them...

We hear this so often that our minds barely process it, we may even filter it out. Until D'varim, most of what comes out of Moshe's mouth are not his own words.

Aharon is considered to be Moshe's mouthpiece, but *Moshe* is also *God's* mouthpiece.

When we do hear from Moshe directly, his words are typically brief. An exchange at a burning bush. A discussion of the judicial system with his father-in-law. A plea for Miriam's healing. Words spoken in anger while hitting a rock. And then there are the somewhat lengthier discussions with God arguing for the people to be spared punishment. I don't have an exact count, but it's clear that the vast majority of what Moshe says to the people until D'varim is simply a passing-on of God's words. And a large percentage of Moshe's personal, original speech is addressed to God rather than people.

Now, in D'varim, we hear both Moshe's own *words*, and his own *voice*, his thoughts and feelings. As he speaks to the people day after day, three things are revealed. First, we learn what Moshe thinks are the most important laws and concepts as the people prepare to enter the land and Moshe prepares for his death. Second, we gain insight into how Moshe views God, after an utterly unique decades-long relationship. Third, we are able to learn how Moshe views the people when he is not reacting to a specific incident but standing before them with deliberation.

Looking at the first of these, how does Moshe - through whom every commandment has been given, who judges all but the most difficult cases - distill a life's-worth of laws through the filter of his deep knowledge of God and of the people? What is the essence of the torah that Moshe wants to convey? Not the disposal of parts of sacrificial animals, the rules of tithing, or even the details of keeping shabbat. In fact, his list is extremely similar to one I suspect you or I might compile for ourselves.

Verse 10:12 reads:

וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ שָׂאֵל מֵעַמְּךָ כִּי אִם-לְיִרְאָה אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְלַכֵּת בְּכָל-דַּרְכָּיו וּלְאַהֲבָה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת-ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ: לְשִׁמֹּר אֶת-מִצְוֹת ה' וְאֶת-חֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה הַיּוֹם לְטוֹב לָךְ

And now, O Israel, what does your God demand of you? Only this: to revere your God, to walk only in divine paths, to love and to serve your God with all your heart and soul, keeping God's commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you today, for your good.

In verse 10:17 Moshe states:

בִּי ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם הוּא אֱלֹהֵי הָאֱלֹהִים וְאֲדֹנֵי הָאֲדֹנָיִם הָאֵל הַגָּדֹל הַגִּבּוֹר וְהַנּוֹרָא אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִשָּׂא פָנָיִם וְלֹא יִקַּח שָׂחָד: עֹשֶׂה מִשְׁפָּט יְתוֹם וְאֶלְמָנָה וְאֵהָב גֵּר לְתַת לוֹ לֶחֶם וְשִׂמְלָה: וְאֶהְבֶּתֶם אֶת־הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

For your God is the supreme God and the supreme Ruler, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing food and clothing. — You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Love and obey God. Follow the 10 commandments. Be kind to others less fortunate. Be grateful for what you have and remember from Whom it came. And especially, do not worship idols and other gods. After 40 years of laws, at the brink of the Promised Land which he will not enter, this is what Moshe wants urgently to imprint upon the people. The rest, it seems, is commentary.

And what do we learn in D'varim about Moshe's view of God? Moshe has seen God at the rawest, without a mediator. He has spoken with God daily in a cloud over his tent. He has seen God's feet resting on a sapphire footstool, God's palm, and God's back. He has seen God's plagues and God's miracles. He has seen God's wrath - we might even say impetuosity - and what the torah calls jealousy. He has seen God's harsh decrees that radically alter a human life - decrees like consigning a generation of former slaves to die in the desert or refusing to let an 120-year-old man fulfill his life's dream.

Especially now, denied entry to the Promised Land unfairly (at least in his view), we could imagine Moshe saying almost anything about God. But these parshiyot show that after a 40+ year relationship, Moshe deeply believes that God is good and trustworthy. That God holds the people dear and wants what is best for them. That God will forgive the people at any time if they will only return to the commandments.

In verse 7:12, the first verse in the parsha, Moshe promises:

וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמָעוּן אֶת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וְשִׁמְרֶתֶם וְעִשִּׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַר ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ אֶת־הַבְּרִית וְאֶת־הַחֻסָּד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לְאֲבוֹתֶיךָ

And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, your God will keep in mind the covenant and love with which an oath was made to your ancestors:

In verse 8:5 Moshe explains:

וַיִּדְעַתְּ עִם־לְבָבְךָ כִּי בְּאִשֶּׁר יִסֵּר אִישׁ אֶת־בְּנוֹ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מִסִּפְרָךְ

Bear in mind that your God disciplines you just as a parent disciplines a child.

God may seem harsh at times, but God's actions are all driven by faithfulness. God has singled the people out for a special, eternal relationship. Yes, God will remove them from the land if they break the covenant, but God has given them the instructions they need to succeed, if only they will open the manual. God will always wait for the people, like a loving parent.

And lastly, what does Moshe think about the people whom he has led for so long, who have gone astray so often and complained so much? Despite everything that has happened between him and the people, Moshe's attitude toward them is very similar to what he believes God's to be. He is loving and forgiving. He fears that the people may choose the wrong path, and he only wants the best for them in the end. In his speeches, he uses as many rhetorical devices and psychological angles as possible trying to reach *all* the people and ensure a bright future for them.

*Remove the barriers from your heart and do not remain stubborn any more. (10:16)
Remain in awe of God, serve God, cling to God, swear by God's name. God is your praise and your God, the One who did for you these great and awesome deeds that you saw with your very eyes. (10:20-21)*

"Please," he is saying, "for your own sakes, choose the right path. Don't bring punishment upon yourselves." In my current stage of life, I feel a familiar undertone in Moshe's words. The kids are all grown up now (or think they are), going off to college with a lot still to learn. Moshe is the concerned, maybe desperate parent trying to get across the key messages and lessons that he fears may not have taken root until now. His deep and selfless caring shines through his words.

Until D'varim, we could not know what Moshe thought was important, what Moshe believed of God, or what Moshe felt about the people. Finally we hear the voice of this man who has known both the people and God intimately for 40 years. The previously-hidden contours of these relationships are revealed in these last speeches, vastly enriching our understanding of Moshe and his life's experience.

Our liturgy is also greatly enriched. I think it's not an accident that the rabbis found so many verses and concepts of value in these parshiyot. God's words are important, of course, but God is not human. While God may command the people, Moshe must try to convince them, human to human, to reach their hearts, to determine what words may leave the most lasting impression and have the greatest effect.

How fortunate we are that in D'varim, Moshe is finally able to speak, passing down words so meaningful, so moving that they remain some of the cornerstones of our prayers and still speak powerfully to us today.

Shabbat shalom