



D'var Torah – Parshat Ekev, Aug. 5, 2023

By Jessica Weinfeld

Shabbat Shalom!

In parshat Ekev, Moshe presents to the Israelite people a series of rewards that will result from following G-d's commandments: they will be fruitful and multiply; their crops will grow; their flocks will prosper; G-d will remove all sickness from their midst; and the Israelites will vanquish their enemies. If the Israelites forget G-d and pursue idol worship, they will be destroyed.

Moshe's list of rewards and punishments reads less like a moral code—which is how we frequently view mitzvot—and more like a quid-quo-pro contract. He seems to imply that B'nai Yisroel will only do mitzvot for the sake of a reward, or out of fear of G-d's wrath.

But of course, when Moshe was reviewing G-d's law, he was speaking to a B'nai Yisroel in a very different situation than we find ourselves today. In Perek Tet (Chapter Nine), Moshe recounts the story of the golden calf and as well as four other times when B'nai Yisroel rebelled against G-d. The people have just wandered in the desert for forty years, and are about to embark on a military campaign to repossess a land that they have never seen under a new leader, Joshua. This new generation has grown up as desert wanderers, and is about to change their entire mode of life in order to become farmers and shepherds in the Land of Israel.

Today, Jews aren't doing anything of the sort. So—keeping Moshe's presentation in mind—how should the modern Jew feel about mitzvot? What are the attitudes in our tradition?

Knowing Jewish law, there are an abundance of opinions.

In the Talmud, in Pesachim 50b, we learn that doing mitzvot for the wrong reasons also merits a reward: לעולם יעסוק אדם בתורה ומצוות אף על פי שלא לשמה, שמתוך שלא לשמה בא לשמה. One who does mitzvot for the wrong reasons will come to understand them and do them for their own sake. The ideal state here is doing a mitzvah for its own sake. Any other act simply helps us advance to the point where we can understand that mitzvot are inherently correct.

Perhaps Moshe had this logic in mind when he wanted to incentivise and frighten B'nai Yisroel into compliance. His list of rewards and punishments was not meant to be the only value for mitzvot, but was meant instead to set B'nai Yisroel along a path that would allow them to appreciate mitzvot for their own sake.

Perkei Avot has more to add. אִישׁ סוֹבּוּ אֶתְיָגוֹןִים is quoted as saying, “do not be like servants who serve the master to receive a reward, but be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of a reward, and let the reverence of heaven be upon you.” אֶתְיָגוֹןִים teaches us to do mitzvot out of reverence for G-d. When we do mitzvot with the expectation that they will benefit ourselves—say, acting nicely to someone because you want them to give you preferential treatment—then we only set ourselves up for disappointment when those goals fail to fully materialize. However, if we act out of respect for G-d, we will always be satisfied with our conduct as inherently right, regardless of how it impacts our lives. This is a stark contrast to Moshe’s incentivisation, but one that I find more relatable.

Despite Moshe’s enticing rewards and dire warnings, the ancient Israelites went astray. Later prophets, like Isaiah and Jeremiah, describe with cutting words the moral rot and disrespect infecting ancient Jewish society: “Their land is full of idols; and they bow to the work of their hands...And the people oppress each other.” (Isaiah 2:8, 3:5). Just a few weeks ago, we commemorated the events that took place on Tisha B’Av: the failure of our ancestors’s faith and their military destruction. The threatened punishments that Moshe lists for Bnai Yisroel in Ekev did not provide sufficient deterrence to keep the Kingdom of Israel in line. Even after they were expelled by the Babalonians and allowed to return to Israel decades later, they failed a second time and were expelled by the Romans. It seems that doing mitzvot for the sake of rewards and for fear of punishments just didn’t work.

Often, I’ve found myself falling into the reward trap when I set aside time to rest on Shabbat and holidays. I tell myself that if I observe the mitzvah of resting, I’ll be more refreshed for my work the coming week. But resting on Shabbat can hardly correct the past week of bad work habits, and expecting that a holy day is going to serve a practical purpose in one’s life defeats the purpose of a mitzvah. Sure enough, I find it easier to observe Shabbat when I simply appreciate the inherent value of having a time set aside for praying, studying, and resting.

The later teachings of the Talmud seem to take this view into account, providing the viewpoint that we should do mitzvot because they form a moral code. In another point of Perkei Avot wisdom, Ben Azzai states, “The reward for a mitzvah is another mitzvah, and the reward for a sin is another sin.”

Habits are powerful. By doing mitzvot for not just their own sake, but also the sake of the future mitzvot that will follow, we solidify our commitment to Jewish life and law. And we make for ourselves a more meaningful way of life than the one our ancestors lost in the ancient Kingdom of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom!