

## Eikev – 5782

Back some 30 years ago, when our kids were teenagers, the synagogue budget was not anywhere near as tight as it is now. United Synagogues of Conservative Judaism had instituted a summer retreat for specifically religious lay leaders in the smallest of conservative synagogues. The goal was to better prepare people like me, even back then, to function as religious lay leaders when there was no rabbi present for a variety of events. I was invited by the board at the time to participate and off I went to Ramah in the Poconos, a camp so big they had not one but two shifts for meals in the dining hall on Shabbat. Now that I think about it, I might have rubbed shoulders with a certain young man who became world famous as a CNN host, one Jake Tapper. That was where, for the first time, I encountered women who not only donned Tallitot but Tefillin as well.

We spent a glorious full week learning better the melody to be used for week-day davening, how important it was to include a Davar Torah at many events because it raised the bar on the level of spirituality of the said event, how important the choreography was in davening and so forth. We spent a lot of time looking at the substance of what we are actually praying for and about but not nearly enough time to really satisfy the appetite only slightly what it. The instructors were products of the Jewish Theological Seminary and I remember very clearly, one youngish rabbi who took apart the Al Cheyt from Yom Kippur. I so clearly remember him asking us in what ways we could possibly be stiff-necked because we ask forgiveness for being stiff-necked. That memory came back at me on Thursday when I read this week's parsha Eikev. In Devarim, chapter 9, verse 6 we read "Know, then, that it is not for any virtue of yours that the Lord your God is giving you this good land to

possess for you are a stiff-necked people.” So, I found myself, yet again, dwelling upon that concept

The rabbis are not really unanimous on whether this is a bad or a good thing. Their view of their disagreement stems from where it is positioned specifically in the parsha. Moshe has told the Israelites that everything HaShem has done for them, was done out of love. In fact, that is where the parsha begins. But it doesn't end there. The sages point out that we are given free will. We can choose Yetzer HaTov or Yetzer HaRah, the good or the evil inclination. Indeed, we all possess both within our psyches. That is what makes us all human. One can look at our Torah and the exhortations it makes to all of us the same way one can remember how most of us were raised. Our cultural heritage directs us to choose good rather than evil, to do good for others. Indeed, every so often on Thursday morning when I read a paragraph of Torah so that we can say the Kaddish DeRabbanan, we are reminded by the sages that since we could no longer sacrifice on the temple mount as penance for our sins, our tradition gave us deeds of lovingkindness to perform to show our repentance and our desire to do better next time.

So, this brings me to, what seems to me, is the central message of this exhortation not to be a stiff-necked people. We all of us make mistakes and we all of us usually try to do good by others, but that is only a sign of what I think the sages are getting at in their analysis of this part of the parsha. Last week, I referred to the fact that at the time that all these events were occurring in our parsha, the Israelites were surrounded by cultures that did not include any reference to love or to repentance or to forgiveness. The Romans, the Greeks, the Assyrians, the Egyptians, the Persians, they all glorified strength and human weakness was exactly that. It was seen as a fatal flaw. Their cultures and social organization were predominantly

oriented around a powerful, rich elite at the top and a mass of slaves or workers at the bottom. Their governance was based upon the pursuit of power. That's why we refer to them as empires. Failure was punished and there was no incentive to pick oneself up and try better the next time. Failures were cast aside.

But the rabbis acknowledge, especially Maimonides, that this reference to being stiff necked was meant to suggest that we needed to swallow our pride, pick ourselves up and keep going. That HaShem would still love us and support us. Our parsha goes on to precisely suggest that. Moses tells the Israelites that Hashem will stand beside them as long as they give him half a chance to do that. To make mistakes and be stubborn and to lose is very human. What is not as easy to do is pick oneself up from the ruins of what has happened to go on. As I write this, I am reminded that we have a very real reminder of that when we lose a member of our family. WE withdraw into our private lives but the period of shiva. We are allowed to mourn and to shun others and to rend our clothes and not pay attention to our physical needs. But at the end of Shiva, we must get up, walk out that door and rejoin the real world. It's exactly what we mean to imply when someone has a bike or car accident, and they are reminded that they have to get back behind the wheel or on the bike and continue on.

In my profession, we call that grit now. It wasn't something that we paid much attention to when I was a teacher, but as I became a consultant and then a teacher of other teachers, it gained increasing prominence. And when you think about it, that is what we have, as a people, always done in the face of adversity and persecution. We have circled the wagons and then got on with it. That's what is happening at the end of Fiddler on the Roof when Tevye sings Anatevka. WE gather the remnants of our lives and look

for ways to begin again. WE are doing that now, as we emerge from the remnants of the pandemic, pick up the ends of where we were before and strive to rebuilt and expand what we had before. If this is not the essence of being stiff necked, then I don't know what is. We stand tall and erect and move forward. To be stiff necked means for sure that we find it hard to apologize, to understand that we are only a small cog in a much bigger wheel, but Eikev reminds us that is precisely what we are. HaShem is there for us, but we have to meet him halfway through our own approach to live. Shabbat Shalom