

EIKEV - 5783

When I first began to compose these divrei Torah at the start of the pandemic, I tried to come at the preparations the same way every week. Sometimes, I begin with the original text, other times with ideas from reading commentaries I turn to for insight and guidance. I admit to also being guided in my approach by what's going on from day to day in my other home. As most of you know, this afternoon we will welcome our son Noah and two of his three children, our grandson Eitan who will be eleven in a few months and our granddaughter Dafna, who just turned seven. They fly in from Israel. Tomorrow they'll be joined by our daughter Rebecca, her husband David and our granddaughter Sylvia who is just six. They come from Minneapolis. As I sit in front of my computer screen, I am aware of the fact that so much has changed and wonder just who I ought to be addressing my words to and for what purpose. Should I even be bothering. I agree with the sages, however, that we have, as a people, been guided for millennia by the words of the Torah and, indeed, this week's parsha addresses that very fact. It is instructive therefore to think through what we read and what it has to say to us in the here and now. I hope you feel the same way and sense that from time to time, something hits home and leaves you thinking. So onwards.

When I read the text of this week's parsha, Eikev, I really sensed that Moshe Rabeinu was still having a hissy fit, ranting on about how the children of Israel hadn't stopped complaining the whole time they were in the desert and how nothing ever seemed to be good enough for them. He especially focussed on the manna and obeying HaShem. It just sounded so much like he was venting, looking at the text through a very modern set of eyes. He had every right to be bitterly disappointed. He worked so hard for all those years to save his people and be their leader and show the way forward and he was bidding farewell but with a feeling of profound dissatisfaction and a sense of failure. That is how I was interpreting the words of Eikev and as I think about having a houseful of three generations of Slepkovs, I can identify. After all, neither of our two are supporting a synagogue or any aspect of formal religion.

But then, I read some commentators and my sense of the moment evolved. One of the commentaries I read focussed on the manna and how it symbolized how dependent the Israelite tribes had been on the beneficence of HaShem. "He subjected you to the

hardship of hunger and then gave you manna to eat in order to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but that man may live on anything that the Lord decrees.” Clearly, one of the messages Moshe was trying to convey was the importance of his people taking command of their own future successes and destiny. He goes on further in Eikev to focus on the difference between the need to draw water for plants in Egypt and the rain that will fall on its own in the promised land. But the rain falls because HaShem arranged it so. This has been an ongoing theme especially in the book of Devarim. Moses is pointing out to the people that they do indeed have free will, but they are not alone in their search for fulfilment and understanding. HaShem has stood behind them and will continue to support them if they choose Yetzer HaTov, the good way and choose life. As I reviewed this, I am remembering an evening when, after teaching Hebrew High School for Rabbi Gary Listokin, in the classroom we’ve now converted to an archive / museum room, I got frustrated by their lack of paying attention. Rabbi GSL as he used to sign his name, may his memory be a blessing, reminded me that we will never know when something we said or did will resonate with those we have taught and help steer them down a better path.

Another commentator focussed on the question of leadership, another theme of the book of Devarim. I was lost in the words of that particular Davar Torah especially because it proceeded to bring in works from the Mishnah and the Talmud and I get very frustrated because I have such little background in either. But as I struggled to follow the argument, I began to reflect on how in my teacher education classes I reminded my students that it takes good followers to make a good leader. I often referred to the fairy tale of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. This helped me to remember how I sometimes ranted not unlike Moshe in front of my classes because things had not gone well, or they had not done well or misbehaved and realized that my reaction was because they were not following my lead and I found that frustrating. And Rabbi Gary’s words would come back to haunt me. No doubt that is exactly how Moshe felt but knew as well that where there is love and acceptance of the other, one can rant and rave and the next day, all is forgiven, and life begins anew.

This led nicely into the last Davar Torah, this one written by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks and he reinforced the message of Eikev really is drawn home by the first words of the Parsha.....And if you obey these rules and observe them carefully, the Lord your

God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made with your fathers. Sacks focusses on the word OBEY and points out it really is all about listening and hearing. How often did I hear the expression in Yiddish from my parents or grandparents.... Ich Hob dir Desogt..... I told you so. In a way Moshe was expressing the same sentiment but before the life of the Israelite people continued without him in the promised land. I am telling you what you have to do, and I ask you to remember. I want you to hear....to listen with your heart to what I am offering you.

We are presented in the Torah a way of life, which we accepted at Sinai, a roadmap of how to live and how to respond to the challenges we must endure in order to make our way in the world. We do have options, we have choices we can make, but if we listen to the still small voice of our people and our tradition, making choices becomes infinitely easier. As I type these words, I am reminded of one of our most famous tribe members who wrote about the Id, the Ego, and the Superego and the psychological trauma that can ensue if one or the other of the three override the other two. Moshe is enjoining us through his words in Devarim to hear the voice of our superego and follow the precepts of the covenant so that HaShem can favour us with his beneficence, and we can favour him with our faith. It takes a good student to make a good teacher. And isn't that what we hope for as parents – that when our kids have to make choices in their own lives, they will be guided by those same lessons we think they didn't pay attention to way back when. I'll try not to be too judgemental as I watch kids now parents themselves. So far, I've been very proud..... I see my efforts paying off. We can only hope that we live long enough to see the same thing in our congregations, from generation to generation. Shabbat shalom.