

## Parashat Eikev

Last week I had the pleasure of focusing on the first paragraph of the Shema Yisroel and the great importance of the sense of hearing in Judaism. In this week's parsha Eikev, I again would like to focus on two areas. The first is to compare the second paragraph of the Shema (Deuteronomy: 11:13-21) and how it mimics the first paragraph as described in parsha Va'etchanan but how it is significantly different. The second idea that I will focus on is the concept of the Greatness and Humility of God as written in this week's Parsha and the Talmud.

The first paragraph of the Shema as discussed last week in Parsha Va'etchanan consists of the Shema Yisroel and the V'ahavta. "And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. The concept of might has been discussed by Rashi and other commentators to mean with all your wealth or money. The first paragraph continues "And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart. And you shall teach them diligently to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up. And you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the door posts of your house and upon your gates." So this prayer discusses teaching Torah to your children, putting teffilin on your arm and hand and on your forehead and placing a mezuzah on your door, in that order. The order of the three mitzvot are teaching Torah, putting on teffilin and placing a mezuzah on the doorposts of your house and upon your gates.

The verses are in the second person singular and therefore represent a command to the individual Jewish person. It has been thought that this paragraph addresses a higher spiritual individual who is willing to sacrifice his life (with all your soul) for God. The time would be when the Beit HaMikdash existed and spirituality was at its highest. The prototype of the idea of with all your soul would be Rabbi Akiva who recited the Shema as he was being tortured by the Romans and when asked when he was dying, told his students that he was giving up his soul to God.

The second paragraph of the Shema occurs in this week's parsha of Eikev as I mentioned earlier and is found in Chapter 11, verses 13-21. This second paragraph repeats many of the themes from the first paragraph, but adds promises of rewards and punishments. Let's listen to it. "And it shall come to pass if you surely *listen* to the commandments that I command you today to love the Lord your God and to serve him with all your heart and all your soul." (Notice how "with all your might is omitted"). "That I will give rain to your land, the early and the late rains, that you may gather in your grains, your wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your fields for your cattle and you will eat and you will be satisfied. Beware, lest your heart be deceived and you turn to other gods and worship them. And anger of the Lord will blaze against you, and He will close the heavens and there will not be rain, and the earth will not give you its fullness, and you will perish quickly from the good land that the Lord gives you. So you shall put these, my words on your heart and on your soul; and you shall bind them for signs on your hands, and they shall be for frontlets between your eyes.

And you shall teach them to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit at home, and when you walk along the way, and when you lie down and when you rise up.

And you shall write them on the door posts of your house and on your gates. In order to prolong your days and the days of your children on the land that the Lord promised your fathers that he would give

them, as long as the days that the heavens are over the earth." Also notice how putting on Tefillin precedes teaching Torah to your children and again the mitzvah of the mezuzah comes last.

The third paragraph of the Shema comes from Numbers Chapter 15, vs: 37-41 and focuses primarily on tzitzit and reminds the Bnei Yisrael that He took them out of the land of Egypt.

Although there are some similarities between the first and the second paragraphs of the Shema, there are noticeable differences. The second paragraph is written in the second person plural and most likely represents a presentation to the entire community rather than the individual as in the first paragraph and most importantly talks about abundance and retribution. Simply stated this second paragraph contains if/then ideas warning of the consequences of not following the commandments. Rabbi Harold Kushner quotes Yeshayahu Leibowitz as finding two distinct theological approaches to the first two passages that are recited after the Shema Yisrael. There are some people (addressed in the first paragraph) who instinctively love God so much that they are eager to do God's will with no thought of reward. Then there are others, at a less developed theological level (addressed in the second passage) who can be persuaded to do what is right only with the hope of reward and the threat of punishment. But Rabbi Kushner brilliantly asks "How shall we understand this second passage given that we find no connection between morality and rainfall or, for that matter, morality and good fortune? Many admirable people are not blessed with abundance. Righteous individuals may not always prosper, and wicked individuals may not always suffer the consequences of their wickedness. Would we expect God to send life-saving rain to a good person's farm but make sure none of it fell on the fields of a wicked neighbor?" Rabbi Kushner concludes, however, by stating that righteous communities, however, will tend to thrive and bestow blessings on all their members, the good and less good alike. And wicked communities will bring misfortune on all their inhabitants.

Why is Me'odecha, with all your might (wealth, riches) omitted in this second paragraph? In the first paragraph after the Shema, Moses is addressing a spiritually higher level individual who like Rabbi Akiva would be willing to give up everything for upholding the Law and worshipping God with all their might and strength. Not necessarily so with the general population of Israelites who are addressed in the second person plural. This second paragraph of the Shema is problematic because it focuses on rewards and punishments.

Although, many commentators have given different interpretations on the absence of "with all your might" in this week's parsha, a fascinating interpretation of this omission comes from the chapter of Eikev in Rabbi Heschel Greenberg's most recent book entitled *Light from the Future*. In his chapter on Parsha Eikev, Rabbi Greenberg quotes the Rebbe, Menachem Mendel Schneerson as suggesting that the second paragraph of the Shema represents a period of Exile, which is the present time, in which only the minimum standards of devotion to God are maintained. This also explains, according to Rabbi Greenberg why the first paragraph of the Shema addresses the Jewish people in the singular. In spiritually heightened times the Jewish people are unified both spiritually and physically, as opposed to the period of our exile, when we are fragmented. Indeed, even the wicked Haman acknowledged this exile phenomenon when he charged that the Jews are "scattered and dispersed among the nations." He was speaking not only of their geographic separation but also of their internal divisions. In conclusion, the second paragraph of the Shema written in the second person plural is addressing a spiritually lower level of Jews who are incapable of loving God "with all their strength, their might and their riches.

My second area of focus this morning is a sequence of verses in this week's sedra which has given rise to a beautiful Talmudic passage - one that has found a place in the siddur. It is among the readings we say after the Evening Service on Saturday night as Shabbat comes to an end. The text is from Deut: 10, 17-18. "For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God who shows no favoritism and accepts no bribe. He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing."

The juxtaposition of these two verses-the first about God's supremacy, the second about how he cares for the low and lonely - could not be more striking. The Power of powers cares for the powerless (Rabbi Sacks). The infinitely great shows concern for the small. The Being at the heart of being listens to those at the margins: the orphan, the widow, the stranger, the poor, the outcast, the neglected. On this idea, the third century teacher Rabbi Yochanan built the following homily (Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 31a).

Rabbi Yochanan said "wherever you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you will find His humility. This is written in the Torah, repeated in the Prophets, and stated a third time in the Writings. The homily ends with the words, "Father of the fatherless and judge of widows, is God in His holy habitation."

It is this passage that found its way into the Ashkenazi service at the end of Shabbat. Its presence there is to remind us that, as the day of rest ends and we return to our weekday concerns, we should not be so caught up in our own interests that we forget others less fortunate. To care only for ourselves and those immediately dependent on us is not "the way of God." (Rabbi Sacks) According to Rabbi Sacks, this concept of humility is one of the great contributions of the Torah to Western civilization and it is set out in the words of our sedra, when Moses told the people of the "God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awe-inspiring God" whose greatness lay not just in the fact that He was Creator of the universe and shaper of history but that "He upholds the cause of the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing." Those who do this are the true men and women of God.

Shabbat Shalom.