

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Eikev
August 24, 2019 *** 23 Av, 5779

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

TODAY'S PORTIONS

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Eikev in A Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/3041/jewish/Eikev-in-a-Nutshell.htm

In the Parshah of Eikev ("Because"), Moses continues his closing address to the children of Israel, promising them that if they will fulfill the commandments (mitzvot) of the Torah, they will prosper in the Land they are about to conquer and settle in keeping with G-d's promise to their forefathers.

Moses also rebukes them for their failings in their first generation as a people, recalling their worship of the Golden Calf, the rebellion of Korach, the sin of the spies, their angering of G-d at Taveirah, Massah and Kivrot Hataavah ("The Graves of Lust"). "You have been rebellious against G-d," he says to them, "since the day I knew you." But he also speaks of G-d's forgiveness of their sins, and the Second Tablets which G-d inscribed and gave to them following their repentance. Their forty years in the desert, says Moses to the people, during which G-d sustained them with daily manna from heaven, was to teach them "that man does not live on bread alone, but by the utterance of G-d's mouth does man live."

Moses describes the land they are about to enter as "flowing with milk and honey," blessed with the "seven kinds" (wheat, barley, grapevines, figs, pomegranates, olive oil and dates), and as the place that is the focus of G-d's providence of His world. He commands them to destroy the idols of the land's former masters, and to beware lest they become haughty and begin to believe that "my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth."

A key passage in our Parshah is the second chapter of the Shema, which repeats the fundamental mitzvot enumerated in the Shema's first chapter, and describes the rewards of fulfilling G-d's commandments and the adverse results (famine and exile) of their neglect. It is also the source of the precept of prayer, and includes a reference to the resurrection of the dead in the messianic age.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Isaiah 49:14 - 51:3

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/543183/jewish/Haftarah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftarah is the second of a series of seven "haftorot of Consolation." These seven haftarot commence on the Shabbat following Tisha b'Av and continue until Rosh Hashanah.

The exiled Jewish people express their concern that G-d has abandoned them. G-d reassures them that it is not so, comparing His love and mercy for His people to that of a mother for her children, and even greater than that, too.

The prophet Isaiah then touchingly describes the ingathering of the exiles which will occur with the Messiah's arrival and returning to the initial subject matter of this haftarah, that of the

Jewish people's complaint of being abandoned by G-d, he reminds them of their rebellious behavior that brought about the exile and suffering. He concludes with encouraging words, reminding us of what had happened to our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah. Just as they were blessed with a child when they had all but given up hope, so too, G-d will send us the Messiah.

Food For Thought

The Politics of Memory (Eikev 5779) by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/the-politics-of-memory-eikev-5779/>

In Eikev Moses sets out a political doctrine of such wisdom that it can never become redundant or obsolete. He does it by way of a pointed contrast between the ideal to which Israel is called, and the danger with which it is faced. This is the ideal:

Observe the commands of the Lord your God, walking in His ways and revering Him. For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land – a land with streams and pools of water, with springs flowing in the valleys and hills; a land with wheat and barley, vines and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey; a land where bread will not be scarce and you will lack nothing; a land where the rocks are iron and you can dig copper out of the hills. When you have eaten and are satisfied, bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you. (Deut. 8:6–10)

And this is the danger:

Be careful that you do not forget the Lord your God, failing to observe His commands, His laws, and His decrees that I am giving you this day. Otherwise, when you eat and are satisfied, when you build fine houses and settle down, and when your herds and flocks grow large and your silver and gold increase and all you have is multiplied, then your heart will become proud and you will forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.... You may say to yourself, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." But remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms His covenant, which He swore to your forefathers, as it is today. (Deut. 8:11–18)

The two passages follow directly on from one another. They are linked by the phrase "when you have eaten and are satisfied," and the contrast between them is a fugue between the verbs "to remember" and "to forget."

Good things, says Moses, will happen to you. Everything, however, will depend on how you respond. Either you will eat and be satisfied and bless God, remembering that all things come from Him – or you will eat and be satisfied and forget to whom you owe all this. You will think it comes entirely from your own efforts: "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me." Although this may seem a small difference, it will, says Moses, make all the difference. This alone will turn your future as a nation in its own land.

Moses' argument is brilliant and counter-intuitive. You may think, he says, that the hard times are behind you. You have wandered for forty years without a home. There were times when you had no water, no food. You were exposed to the elements. You were attacked by your enemies. You may think this was the test of your strength. It was not. The real challenge is not poverty but affluence, not slavery but freedom, not homelessness but home.

Many nations have been lifted to great heights when they faced difficulty and danger. They fought battles and won. They came through crises – droughts, plagues, recessions, defeats – and were toughened by them. When times are hard, people grow. They bury their differences. There is a sense of community and solidarity, of neighbours and strangers pulling together. Many people who have lived through a war know this.

The real test of a nation is not if it can survive a crisis but if it can survive the lack of a crisis. Can it stay strong during times of ease and plenty, power and prestige? That is the challenge that

has defeated every civilisation known to history. Let it not, says Moses, defeat you. Moses' foresight was little less than stunning. The pages of history are littered with the relics of nations that seemed impregnable in their day, but which eventually declined and fell and lapsed into oblivion – and always for the reason Moses prophetically foresaw. They forgot.[1] Memories fade. People lose sight of the values they once fought for – justice, equality, independence, freedom. The nation, its early battles over, becomes strong. Some of its members grow rich. They become lax, self-indulgent, over-sophisticated, decadent. They lose their sense of social solidarity. They no longer feel it their duty to care for the poor, the weak, the marginal, the losers. They begin to feel that such wealth and position as they have is theirs by right. The bonds of fraternity and collective responsibility begin to fray. The less well-off feel an acute sense of injustice. The scene is set for either revolution or conquest. Societies succumb to external pressures when they have long been weakened by internal decay. That was the danger Moses foresaw and about which he warned.

His analysis has proved true time and again, and it has been restated by several great analysts of the human condition. In the fourteenth century, the Islamic scholar Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) argued that when a civilisation becomes great, its elites get used to luxury and comfort, and the people as a whole lose what he called their *asabiyyah*, their social solidarity. The people then become prey to a conquering enemy, less civilised than they are but more cohesive and driven. The Italian political philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) described a similar cycle: People, he said, “first sense what is necessary, then consider what is useful, next attend to comfort, later delight in pleasures, soon grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad squandering their estates.”[2] Affluence begets decadence.

In the twentieth century few said it better than Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*. He believed that the two great peaks of civilisation were reached in ancient Greece and Renaissance Italy, but he was honest enough to see that the very features that made them great contained the seeds of their own demise:

What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy: traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare fluorescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilised than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion.[3]

Moses, however, did more than prophesy and warn. He also taught how the danger could be avoided, and here too his insight is as relevant now as it was then. He spoke of the vital significance of memory for the moral health of a society.

Throughout history there have been many attempts to ground ethics in universal attributes of humanity. Some, like Immanuel Kant, based it on reason. Others based it on duty. Bentham rooted it in consequences (“the greatest happiness for the greatest number”[4]). David Hume attributed it to certain basic emotions: sympathy, empathy, compassion. Adam Smith predicated it on the capacity to stand back from situations and judge them with detachment (“the impartial spectator”). Each of these has its virtues, but none has proved fail-safe.

Judaism took, and takes, a different view. The guardian of conscience is memory. Time and again the verb *zachor*, “remember,” resonates through Moses' speeches in Deuteronomy: *Remember that you were slaves in Egypt...therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Shabbat day. (Deut. 5:15) *Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the desert these forty years...(Deut.8:3) *Remember this and never forget how you provoked the Lord your God to anger in the desert...(Deut. 9:7) *Remember what the Lord your God did to Miriam along the way after you came out of Egypt. (Deut. 24:9) *Remember

what the Amalekites did to you along the way when you came out of Egypt. (Deut. 25:17)

*Remember the days of old, consider the years of ages past. (Deut. 32:7)

As Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi notes in his great treatise, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, "Only in Israel and nowhere else is the injunction to remember felt as a religious imperative to an entire people." [5] Civilisations begin to die when they forget. Israel was commanded never to forget.

In an eloquent passage, the American scholar Jacob Neusner once wrote:

Civilisation hangs suspended, from generation to generation, by the gossamer strand of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children what it has learned from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. If the guardians of human knowledge stumble only one time, in their fall collapses the whole edifice of knowledge and understanding. [6]

The politics of free societies depends on the handing on of memory. That was Moses' insight, and it speaks to us with undiminished power today. [1] For a recent study of this idea applied to contemporary politics, see David Andress, *Cultural Dementia: How the West Has Lost Its History and Risks Losing Everything Else* (London: Head of Zeus, 2018). [2] Giambattista Vico, *New Science: Principles of the New Science Concerning the Common Nature of Nations* (London: Penguin, 1999), 489. [3] Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), 6. [4] *The Collected Works of Jeremy Bentham: A Comment on the Commentaries and A Fragment on Government*, ed. James Henderson Burns and Herbert Lionel Adolphus Hart (London: Athlone Press, 1977), 393. [5] Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zachor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982), 11. [6] Jacob Neusner, *Conservative, American, and Jewish* (Lafayette, LA: Huntington House, 1993), 35.

Are We Architects of Our Own Fate? By Tamar Marvin PHD

<https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah/back-issues/are-we-architects-our-own-fate>

A central theme of Parashat Eikev is contingency: that a person's fate is predicated on their actions, and the future is not yet written. A core problem occupying medieval philosophers, including the classical Torah commentators, the question of causality continues to fascinate—and elude—us today. In our own time, it tends to be scientists who explore the way that cause and effect play out in time. Physicists debate the linearity of time, with some advancing the block universe theory in which causality is an illusion created by human cognitive processes. Biologists examine the delicate interplay of volition and neural firing, demonstrating that neurons can initiate movement before there is any cognitive sign of intent. The emergent conclusion is that free will may be a quirk of our human perspective, just as our sense of a stable and sensible physical world is belied by the laws of quantum mechanics.

Eikev, meanwhile, insists that free will is at the heart of the covenantal relationship between the Jewish people and God. The opening word of the parashah, eikev, which we use to refer to it, is telling. Eikev literally means "on the heels of"; ekev, the noun, means the heel of the foot, ikvot means footprints, and Yaakov, from the same root, means "he follows," connoting the patriarch's birth order in relation to his twin, Esav. In other words, the word eikev uses concrete physicality to express abstract causality. The parashah thus opens with, "It shall be, following your hearing of these rules and your keeping and doing of them, that the Lord your God will keep the covenant with you that God pledged to your ancestors." There is an integral relationship here between human act and Divine act.

Further into the parashah, Ibn Ezra and Ramban consider the purpose of Divine tests to an omniscient God. Devarim 8:2 reads, "You shall remember the entire way that the Lord your God caused you to walk these forty years in the wilderness in order to afflict you and test you (nassotkha) so as to know what is in your hearts, whether you will keep God's commandments or not." But doesn't God have perfect knowledge of this already? Why was such suffering necessary?

Ibn Ezra's comment here merely says, "I have already explained this." If we turn back in his commentary, all the way to Avraham's sacrifice, we find that Ibn Ezra calls knowledge derived from Divine testing a great secret, known only to God, "the knower of all unknowns." There he suggests that God's testing of Avraham—nissah, the same verb used in our verse—is for the purpose of giving Avraham a reward. It is, in other words, a cultivated opportunity for a human to exercise free will. From his allusion to this explanation in parashat Eikev, we may deduce that Ibn Ezra sees the suffering of the wilderness generation as an opportunity they were given. Ramban has no quarrel with Ibn Ezra's approach, coming to the same conclusion. However, Ramban brings in a fascinating text to illuminate this verse. In Birkat Hamazon, one of our most frequently recited prayers, we are left to grapple with the statement (taken from Tehillim), "I once was young and have now grown old, and have yet to see a righteous person left to suffer, or their children go hungry." But human history, and perhaps our own experiences, show us that innocent people suffer—that hunger is a sociopolitical condition, not a moral one. Here Ramban suggests that the verse speaks specifically of the wilderness generation. God could have led the people through inhabited areas, Ramban points out, but instead caused them to walk in the wilderness. God brought down manna, only to have the desert heat melt it away—and to renew the miracle, faithfully, consistently, over forty long years. Ramban writes, "God brought them through this trial (nissayon—notably, the modern Hebrew word for 'experience') because through it God knows that they will keep the commandments for eternity." Trial—experience—is not necessary to God, but it may be needed by humans, Ramban suggests. For both Ramban and Ibn Ezra, then, the human experience of causality is a vector of meaning. Whatever the nature of time, our experience of its unfolding matters. *(Tamar Marvin, PhD, is a scholar of medieval Jewish intellectual history and adjunct professor at American Jewish University and Hebrew Union College-JIR, Los Angeles. She also develops and teaches full-credit online courses for the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York.)*

[The Loyalty Test by Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz](http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102506082947&ca=fd287112-bd9c-43c3-8d29-917dfc6b2d42)

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The most familiar part of Parashat Ekev comes toward the end, in chapter 11, verses 13-14 when Moshe, speaking in God's voice, tells the Israelites: "If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day...I will grant the rain for your land in season." This is, of course, the second paragraph of the Shema, recited twice daily to fulfill the command to recite them when we lie down and rise up, and written on parchment and stuffed into tefillin and mezuzot so that we can fulfill the command to impress them on our hearts, bind them on our hands, let them be symbols on our forehead, and inscribe them on our doorposts.

But what is the larger context here? And why this emphasis on rain?

The Israelites are about to take a major developmental step as they enter the Land. In the desert, God was ever-present and miracles were obvious - whether in defeating enemies or providing manna. In the Land of Israel, the Israelites have to fight their enemies, establish settlements, and work to produce their own food. This is an important step - a good one - one that God desires. But it is fraught with peril. In the desert, Israelite dependence made them faithful - faithful enough to take this next step (unlike their parents who perished in the desert). But in the Land of Israel, with God taking a step back, the Israelites can easily come to the mistaken belief that they are entirely responsible for their success and comfort. And they will break faith with God and Torah.

Whenever they stepped out of line in the desert, the punishment was swift and painful. Fire consumed them. The earth swallowed them. Snakes bit them. Illness befell them. As Moshe tells them in Devarim 8:5, "Bear in mind that the LORD your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son." But in the Land, just as there will be no obvious and direct miracles, there will be no obvious and direct punishments. And there won't be a leader with singular clear access to God's thoughts and desires who can lay out the right path so clearly.

In the Land, the only indicator of whether God is happy with the Israelites is rain - the key to any

long-term success. As they are told in Devarim 11:10-12:

For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which the LORD your God looks after, on which the LORD your God always keeps His eye, from the year's beginning to the year's end.

The Land of Israel is special to God because it is rain-land. Faith-land. It has no river like the Nile or the Tigris and Euphrates to power the irrigation necessary for a mass civilization. Those dwelling in the Land of Israel have to put in the work, but it is all for naught if forces beyond their control do not cooperate. And the only hope to influence those forces is to be humble in the face of them, and to appreciate them.

Modern Jewish thinkers have rejected this idea that mitzvah performance can influence the weather. The Reform Movement went so far as to remove this paragraph from their prayer book many years ago. But I personally find the message both powerful and important. Security and abundance lead to overconfidence in our merit, our skill, and the solidity and reliability of the world around us. And this overconfidence can quickly lead to arrogance, callousness, and eventually cruelty. We often use our own struggles and victories over adversity to justify not offering more assistance to others.

But so much of the good in our lives is on account of people being more loving, kind, and decent than they have to be. And that is God at work. True security is not achieved by looking out for oneself, but by building a more compassionate world. The Torah thus reminds us that God does not only clear our path of enemies but also "upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing." (10:18) We were once a nation of orphans and widows, strangers with no food and clothing. God's treatment of us is the model for how we are to treat others, and how we treat others is the true test of our loyalty to God. *(Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz is the Director of Engagement at the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem)*

Dvar Haftarah: Look to the Rock by Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein

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This second of the seven haftarot of consolation (Shiva d'nehamta), which follow Tisha b'Av, is a series of prophecies offering messages of strength to those who needed encouragement to return from Babylonian exile to the Judean homeland in Eretz Yisrael. It was also a message of encouragement to those in the Judean homeland challenged with absorbing the returnees. This message is encapsulated in one particular prophecy at the end of the haftarah: "Look to the rock you were hewn from and to the quarry from which you were cut. Look to Avraham your father and to Sarah who spawned you. For he was the one whom I summoned, and I blessed him and made him many." (51:1-2)

This prophecy draws an analogy between the founders of the faith, Avraham and Sarah, and those who would return from the Babylonian exile. Just as Avraham and Sarah left Ur-Kasdim in what would become Babylonia to go to Eretz Canaan, so, too, the Babylonian exiles would leave their temporary homes and return to the land of Judea and there, become a multitudinous nation. In this prophecy, Avraham is symbolically represented by "the rock" and Sarah by the quarry. Together, Avraham and Sarah model for the returnees the mission of rebuilding and repopulating the Jewish homeland.

The intent of this message was not exclusively to encourage the returnees. It also presented a subtle message to those who were not pleased that the Jews of Babylonia were returning. A verse from Ezekiel indicates that some among those who remained in Judea opposed their return because of its burden and/or the fear of being overwhelmed by the returnees: "these dwellers among the ruins on the soil of Israel are saying, Avraham was but one, and he took hold of the land, but we are many. To us has been given the land as an inheritance." (33:24) (See

S. Paul, Isaiah 40-66, Mikra L'Yisrael, pp. 321-2) If this interpretation is indeed the "pshat" or plain meaning of this prophecy, then it was meant as a subtle message to the "natives" who opposed the return of the "refugee" population to Judea that God intended for them to return. The prophet also wanted the refugees to know that their role was no less significant before God than that of those who remained throughout the exile.

This message resonates on so many levels with social problems faced both in Israel and abroad, especially in the US and in Europe. Conflicts between those who consider themselves natives and those who are newcomers are not a new phenomenon. They are and always will be a societal constant. Those who are longtime inhabitants fear that their place in society and their culture will be usurped, while the newcomers only want to feel a part of their new homeland without being treated as aliens. The answer posed by the prophet is that all must feel themselves hewn from a common rock from a common quarry, creating for themselves a common mission in which they will treat each other in kind. (*Rabbi Silverstein is a faculty member of the Conservative Yeshiva in Jerusalem.*)

Ekev by Rabbi Berel Wein

https://www.rabbiwein.com/blog/post-2216.html?utm_source=Parshat+Ekev+5779+-+Rabbi+Wein&utm_campaign=Weekly+Parsha&utm_medium=email

In this week's Torah reading Moshe teaches us that he was instructed by heaven to construct an ark made of wood in order to house the two tablets of stone that he received on Sinai. I have written about this subject before and it is one that has been noted heavily by the commentators to the Torah. But I have become aware of an insight that I feel has great relevance to understanding many of the issues that confront us here in Israeli society and the world generally.

Certainly, there was no shortage of gold, silver, bronze or any other type of valuable and special metal in the camp of Israel during their sojourn in the desert of Sinai. We know from the construction of the Temple/Tabernacle that large amounts of gold and silver as well as bronze were used in order to create that structure and the artifacts inside. So why would Moshe be instructed to fashion a simple and plain box of wood to house the most precious artifacts that humans have ever known – the tablets of Sinai?

Is it not almost disrespectful to treat such holiness in a mundane and ordinary fashion? After all, the tradition in all Jewish communities and synagogues is to decorate and beautify Torah coverings, crowns, breastplates and pointers. And here, the two tablets of stone of Sinai are relegated to an undecorated plain wooden box! This fact alone should make us aware that there are great and profound lessons here.

The wooden box that encased the eternal tablets of stone of Sinai represents the fact that the Torah itself requires no outside affirmations or adornments. It stands alone, it means what it says and is not subject to human improvement or editing. The fact that we decorate the appearance of the scrolls in our synagogues is to enhance our own respect in view of the contents. Over the centuries, and especially over the last few hundred years, there are those that wished to adorn the Torah with strange but temporarily popular crowns and decorations. There was a period in the 19th and even in the 20th century when there were those that claimed that the Torah was for socialism. Others claimed it was for capitalism or other forms of economic and government systems. Everyone attempted to adorn the Torah with its own brand of covering and decoration. By so exalting the Torah, they in fact cheapened it and made it factually irrelevant. The improvements became detriments and the unique message of Judaism was perverted if not lost completely. We are accustomed to homiletic interpretations of words and ideas of Torah. This is part of the "seventy faces" of Torah. However, we should always remember that the text means what it says. The Torah is carried in a simple unadorned wooden

box. To we mere mortals, this is what makes it so meaningful.

[Eikev by Rabbi Shlomo Riskin](https://ots.org.il/shabbat-shalom-parshat-ekev-5779/)

<https://ots.org.il/shabbat-shalom-parshat-ekev-5779/>

Efrat, Israel – “Not by bread alone does a human being live, but rather by that which comes forth from the Lord’s mouth does a human being live.” (Deuteronomy 8:3)

How does the Bible view “life,” that span of time that every individual desperately wishes to preserve and to lengthen, but which is rarely properly utilized? The sad truth is that no one is quite certain how best to use whatever time he/she may be given or to what purpose to dedicate it. How best to “spend” one’s life is the question of questions, and one who lives without asking and answering that question runs the risk of leaving this world without ever having lived at all.

Apparently the Almighty came to the conclusion that the newly freed Israelites were not yet ready to enter the Promised Land; they required an educational “training” period of forty years – a complete generation – in the desert no-man’s-land. They were to experience a kind of “trial by heat and by cold,” with lessons to be learned by a strange mixture of divine bounty mixed together with human uncertainty:

You shall remember the entire journey on which the Lord your God led you these forty years in the desert in order to afflict you, to test you to know that which is in your heart; will you keep His commandments or not? He will afflict you and He will make you hungry; He will provide you with the manna to eat which neither you nor your ancestors experienced previously in order to teach you that not by bread alone does a human being live but rather by that which comes forth from the Lord’s mouth does the human being live. (Deut. 8:1–3)

This major desert experience of the manna was a kind of “timeout” from the Garden of Eden punishment that “by the sweat of your brow shall you eat bread.” On the one hand, God was the beneficent Provider of food, a food which the Israelites only had to gather rather than to manufacture, with every individual receiving precisely what he needed each day; on the other hand, the Israelites had neither the discomfiture nor the exhilaration which is derived from the competition, the ingenuity, the sickness unto death of failure and the dizzying satisfaction of success, which accompany the backbreaking tension-producing dedication to the market place or the agricultural farm. What was the significance of the manna? Which lesson did it convey? The most ancient (and I believe, authentic) versions of the rabbinically accepted Aramaic translation of the biblical text, Targum Onkelos, translates the last words of the verse we have just cited: “Not by bread alone does the human being exist but rather by that which comes forth from God’s mouth does a human being live.” Targum differentiates between the bread necessary for human existence, and the word of God essential to human life. “Existence” is physical subsistence; “life” is essence, the word of God, the life of spirit, of intellect, of sensitivity, of love. For a clearer explanation of Targum’s intent, let us study the second mishna in the seventh chapter of Tractate Shabbat, where the mishna provides us with the list of the thirty-nine prohibited physical activities on the Sabbath (melakhot). The Midrash generally assumes that the source of these prohibited activities is the list of very constructive acts involved in the building of the Tabernacle to God, the Mishkan (Ex. 31:13). Whichever creative acts were involved in the construction of the Tabernacle were prohibited on the Sabbath. However, one of the prohibited activities of this mishna is “baking,” and in the construction of the Mishkan the dye extracts of the plants had to be “boiled” in order to color the fabrics used to beautify the Sanctuary. So why does the mishna list “baking” rather than “boiling”?

The Talmud explains the discrepancy by saying that the mishna wished to highlight the procedures in bread manufacture; and indeed when looking at the prohibited acts from this

perspective, the entire mishna assumes a wholly different focus. First it prohibits bread manufacture, then clothing manufacture, then leather manufacture, and finally acts of building. In effect, the mishna is teaching that the search for food, clothing, and shelter – so central to physical existence and nutritional subsistence – is to be eschewed on the Sabbath day. The days of the week are for physical existence; the Sabbath is for spiritual and intellectual life! And existence and life are the two most crucial elements in our human sojourn in this world. The truth is that animals, no less than humans, also require food, clothing (protection from the elements), and shelter. What makes the human being uniquely human is that which goes beyond physical existence: the spiritual spark of God within him/her, the soul, the heart, and the mind of the human being, which enables him/her to think, to give, to communicate with the other, to love, to repair, and to create.

Most human beings spend their lives working for their physical existence, amassing commodities and the ultimate commodity (money), and collecting objects and things. In the desert they were freed from this pursuit, with the exception of the little time it would take to gather the manna – and no one could take more than his/her needed portion. They could spend the great majority of their time receiving – and pondering over – God’s words, God’s desire that we share with those less fortunate, God’s gift of family and friendship and community and love. The Sabbath day prohibits physical work but stresses family togetherness, Torah study, communal prayer, time-out for God, meditation, and nature walks; the Sabbath is a day of life, not mere existence!

The desert experience was a kind of eternal Sabbath, a taste of a more perfect world, when we learn to do without material extras but would hopefully begin to understand that the real purpose of human life would be to live by God’s words. And in that more perfect world, we would hopefully learn that the necessities for our existence – just as our existence itself – is fundamentally a gift from God, and that the ultimate purpose of our existence is to link ourselves to life, to God, to His will, and to His eternity. On the Sabbath, we sanctify wine, we bless the ḥalla bread, we use the table of food as a means for songs of praise to God and words of Torah, and we link existence to essence, subsistence to God.

No wonder, then, that the Hebrew word “ḥayyim” (life) is always in the plural, because there can be no meaningful human life devoid of loving relationships with others. The two letter “yud’s” (or two yids, Jews) in the center of the word are the shortened form of expressing God’s name, while the outer Hebrew letters “ḥet” and “mem” form the Hebrew word “ḥom” (warmth); love, sensitivity, and caring are central for meaningful human activity on earth. I have never met an individual on his deathbed who regrets the hours he didn’t spend in the office – but most individuals on their deathbed regret the hours they didn’t spend with family and close friends. People are not remembered for the structures they erected; they are always thought about for the lives they have touched and the human situations they have helped.

Rabbi Yitzhak of Berditchev once saw a person running to and fro, as if he were “chasing his own tail.” “Where and why are you running?” he asked. “I am running to make a living,” came the reply. “Just make sure that in the process, you don’t lose your life,” remarked the wise rabbi.

YAHRTZEITS

Rabbi Lisa Vernon remembers her grandfather Arthur J. Vernon on Tuesday August 27th.
Deborah Grossman remembers her father Jordan Brown (Yacov Ben William) on Wednesday August 28th (Av 27).