

Parshat Eikev Planning and planting for future generations

The entire book of Deuteronomy was spoken by Moshe to the Israelites, in the last few weeks before his death. This week's parsha, Eikev, is effectively his last will and testament, a written accounting of the ethical values spoken by God to Moshe and from Moshe, with both love and intensity, to his people. He knew them well and he loved them. He wanted to be sure they would not succumb to the influences and temptations of Canaan, so he began his words reminding them of the long string of sins and rebellions that marked the 40 years since their Exodus from slavery in Egypt. If they and their parents' generation could sin while surrounded by God's gifts of miracles as they traveled through the desert, surely there would be even greater temptations and dangers without constant reminders of God's presence in their lives. Moshe intended his words to stay in the minds and hearts of the people, to provide those reminders and inspire them to live accordingly, by God's word and Torah. He continued in his final sermon by reinforcing specifically, the theology of Divine reward and punishment.

“It will be that if you harken My commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Eternal your God and serving [God] with all your heart and soul, then I [God] will grant the rain for your land in season, the early and the late”...(Deut. 12-13). [BUT], Moshe continues, “take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Eternal's anger will flare up against you, shutting up the skies so there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Eternal is assigning you.” (Deut. 11:13-17)

Language very similar to this can be found in traditional Jewish liturgy, including our prayerbook, as the second paragraph of *V'ahavta* (Deut. 6:5-9), which we say every morning and every night. It is not hard to understand why it made sense and had a good possibility of keeping God's presence in the minds of our biblical ancestors. It is the “if...then..” part of this theology that becomes less useful and even an obstacle for *our* ongoing relationships with God.

Most of us do not believe in divine retribution. Imposing the completely unveiled threats present in Torah, does not sit well with us. My suspicion is that most of us don't believe in a God who manipulates history especially not after biblical times. We do not believe that the devastating so called “natural disasters” we and our worldwide neighbors experience, are God's way of

showing anger because we have come up short in demonstrating our love for and appreciation of God and the gift of Torah. The contrary is true. It's clear that humankind must admit to some responsibility for the disastrous natural state of our worldwide environment. In addition to accepting responsibility for what is "now", we must consider how our actions, or inactions now, will have long term effects on future generations.

The concept of Seven generation stewardship is believed to have originated with the Great Law of the Iroquois. It maintains it is appropriate to think seven generations ahead and decide whether the decisions made today would benefit their descendants. It is frequently associated with the modern, popular concept of environmental stewardship or 'sustainability' but it is much broader in context.

"The Iroquois believe that in every deliberation, we must consider the impact on the seventh generation. Look and listen for the welfare of the whole people and have always in view not only the present but also the coming generations, even those whose faces are yet beneath the surface of the ground -- the unborn of future Nations....Oren Lyons, Chief of the Onondaga Nation, writes: 'We are looking ahead, as is one of the first mandates given us as chiefs, to make sure and that every decision we make relates to the welfare and well-being of [at least] the seventh generation to come...'"¹

These words from the Iroquois resonate with what I believe were Moshe's intentions. They reflect a framing of the ethical demands that Judaism also requires of us. Rabbi Max Chaiken wrote: "Our lives, our existence, our connectedness to All Being [his name for God] asks only that we revere all life,"² including and especially that of future generations.

It is almost inevitable that we feel helpless to overcome the immense number and completely devastating effects of natural disasters, droughts and their inevitable consequences of fires, shriveled crops, food shortages and rising prices. They are all headline stories these days. They already have been and will continue to be the cause of devastated communities and hundreds of thousands of people losing their lives. But depending on God to do the heavy lifting will not be

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seven_generation_sustainability

² Rabbi Max Chaiken serves as the Associate Rabbi at Congregation Kol Ami in West Hollywood.

the answer. We are co-creators with God and at this point humankind must take 100% of the burden to reverse the damage already done and protect the earth and all its inhabitants moving forward. Praying to God, is not the key to plentiful rain and a forever healthy natural environment. Our actions, our way of life, will determine whether or not we will be blessed and even more important, whether we bequeath that original “Heavenly gift” to pass on to future generations.

Let’s take a brief moment to try to understand how we and our predecessors have gotten into this dire situation. Maybe that will be helpful with regard to our future more constructive actions.

Rabbi Arnold Goodman, z”l, a realistic and astute observer of the nature of human beings, suggests “[our current situation] has to do with our addiction to getting things done quickly, to using the easiest energy source available and our general disregard for the misuse of natural sources and its devastating disruption to the health of our worldwide environment.” [Rabbi Goodman reminds us that] “weaning ourselves away from fossil fuels is obviously much easier said than done since much of our modern lifestyle depends upon the availability and the use of [that] energy source.”³

Now, if you are comfortable, please take a deep breath with me, let it out slowly, sit up straight in your chair and get ready to feel pride and hope in possibilities humankind has and will continue to provide.

There is Greta Thunberg, a Swedish young person, born 3 January 2003, who is an environmental activist. She is known for challenging world leaders to take immediate action for climate change mitigation. She has been recognized and awarded a Nobel Prize for her vision and is having a strong, positive, worldwide influence to help us help each other to overcome, beginning now, the disasters created by generations of misguided, perhaps selfish, actions.

³ Rabbi Arnold Goodman MA NISHMA FROM JERUSALEM - EKEV 5772

We have each other, far and wide, and we are actively working together to find solutions to the mess we and generations before us, have created. There are a growing number of people who have chosen and proven themselves able to imagine and implement new ways to use our natural environment and at the same time helping it to heal. Again, Rabbi Arnold Goodman, years before his recent death in February of 2023, reminded us “Our exorbitant use of fossil fuels has spawned research and development of wind and solar power in addition to developing contemporary methods of utilizing the vast resources of natural gas existing in our country and in other areas of the world.”⁴ These provide us with hope. But these sources of energy are not fully developed and not ready for widespread commercial use. So, our challenge remains. But solutions are within our reach. Will we have the discipline to reduce our dependence on fossil fuels? Will we work together to create more effective public transportation? a greater use of carpools? and perhaps even a sustained commitment to urban relocation that will reduce our need for private transportation and instead, have the stores and sites in which we shop for goods and services, more accessible? These are changes within our reach and would help create a more just and equitable distribution of clean energy sources for us and future generations.

There is a wonderful Midrash that recounts an old man seated at a highway crossroads from which there branched two roads. One of them was full of thorns at the beginning but level at the end. The other was level at the beginning but the further along one travelled, they would be trapped in more and more thorns. The old man thus always cautioned travelers to take the first road. Those who followed his advice did find it difficult at first but ultimately arrived at their destination in peace. Those who were tempted by the open road before them soon found themselves caught up in thicket from which it was difficult to extricate themselves.

This ancient parable describes our current situation. Given the reality of climate change and droughts, we can choose the path to help our earth heal that is difficult and painful at present but holds out great promise for the future. Or we could opt for the easy road now and leave not only us but our children and grandchildren, finding ourselves/themselves the victims of even greater future natural catastrophes. The latter is not a viable moral choice.

⁴ Ibid

Also, you've probably heard of Honi the Circle Maker or the rainmaker. Once after asking God to bring rain, it fell from the skies in a tremendous downpour. All the people cheered, ran off to tend to their crops and to plant their vegetables. But Honi set off down the road looking for something to eat.

He came upon an elderly woman who was planting a tree.

Excuse me, he said. What kind of tree are you planting?

It is a carob tree, she said. Honi said to the gardener: Carob huh? How long will it take the tree to bear fruit?

Well, she said, it will take 70 years.

But you're not exactly a youngster. Are you certain you will live another seventy years to enjoy the fruit of this tree?

Perhaps not, said the woman. However, when I was born into this world, I found many beautiful carob trees planted by those who came before me. Just as my ancestors planted trees for me, I am planting trees for my children and grandchildren so they will have carob to eat.

Judaism teaches us it is better to think of others than to be selfish. Honi remembered that and for the rest of his days he helped plant carob trees so all children and grandchildren would have them.

We must do the same. There will be generations after us who will inherit the world we have left them. What do we want our legacy to be? We pray to you, O God, *for strength, determination and will power **to do** instead of only **to pray**, to **become**, instead of just to wish.*

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