

Parasha Page

Parashat Eikev

July 31, 2010

20 Av, 5770

TORAH READING: EIKEV (P. 980)

Highlights:

- Obedience will be rewarded with prosperity, power and health.
- God will help the people to defeat the Canaanite nations.
- A historical review of wilderness experiences is presented to inspire the realization that the people's survival was due, not to the merits of the Israelites, but to God honoring His commitment to the Patriarchs.
- The second paragraph of the Shema is taught to the people.

Food for Thought: TELL IT FROM THE TORAH, GEDALIA PETERSEIL

- Moshe tells Bnei Yisrael the "all God asks of you is that you hold Him in fear (awe), follow in His path, and serve him." Why does Moshe make it appear like this is such a simple task?
- How does the second paragraph of Shema follow logically from the first paragraph?

HAFTARAH: YESHAYAHU 40:1-26 (P. 1197) OU.ORG

2nd of the 7 Haftarat of Consolation read between Tisha B'Av and Rosh HaShana. God's message through the prophet, is that He has not forgotten Zion nor forsaken His People. It might seem that He has abandoned His People and His Land, but there will come a time when the People will return to their roots and be restored to their Land. Exile is not permanent; there was never a "divorce" between God and the People of Israel. God will help in the battles against the mighty nations that oppress His People. God will comforted Zion; the desolated areas will flourish; joy and gladness, thanks and song will be found in Zion.

PARASHA INSIGHTS

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

"Remember the entire path along which the Lord your God led you these forty years in the desert, He sent hardships to test you." (Deut. 8:2)

"The land which you are about to inherit is not like Egypt." (11:10)

Our Biblical portion of Eikev devotes much praise to the glories of the Land of Israel - its majestic topography, its luscious produce, and its freely flowing milk and honey. And in order to conceptually explain the truly unique quality of our land promised us by God, the Biblical text - in chapters eight and eleven of the Book of Deuteronomy - contrasts the Land of Israel with the desert experience of manna on the one hand and the geographical and geological gifts of Egypt on the other, with Israel coming out far ahead. In this commentary - heavily inspired by Rav Elhanan Samet's "Studies of the Weekly Portions" - I shall attempt to understand what it is that makes the land of Israel so special.

The Israelite wanderers are hardly enamored with the manna they receive in the desert. Again and again they complain about the lack of meat and fish (Numbers 11:1-7), about the scarcity of water and fruits, crying out in despair, "Why did you bring God's congregation into this desert? So that we and our livestock should die? Why did you take us out of Egypt and bring us to this terrible place? [the desert] is an area where there are no plants, no figs, no grapes, no pomegranates, no water to drink." (11:4,5) And even in our portion of Eikev, God describes the desert years as years of "hardships to test you," of "chastisement and training" (Deut. 8:3,5). The moral message of the inexhaustible manna was merely to teach the people that the ultimate source of food is God, "so that you may observe His commandments and fear Him." (8:3,6)

Indeed, the desert's difficulties are contrasted with future life in the Land of Israel, the Torah narrative praising the Promised Land's blessings. In three packed verses (8:7-9) the land (*eretz*) - in contrast to the desert - is referred to seven times, a chiasmic structure revealing

in the seven special species of fruit for which Israel is esteemed (wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olive oil and date-honey), a "good land with flowing streams and underground springs, gushing out in valley and mountain, whose stones are iron and from whose mountains you will quarry copper."

The wondrous descriptions depict a wide range of foods and natural resources produced by the earth - from bread and olive oil to copper mines - all of which require serious human ingenuity, input and energy to create a partnership with God to properly develop the gifts inherent in the land. After all, to properly irrigate the fields rainwater must be collected and gathered through the underground springs, the making of bread requires eleven agricultural steps, oil must be carefully extracted from the olive trees by means of olive presses, and the copper must be painstakingly quarried from the depths of the mountains. It is precisely this partnership between God and humanity that is critically necessary to develop - and ultimately perfect - the world which we have been given.

It shouldn't surprise us that Egypt, representing the very antithesis of the desert ("the gift of the Nile," in the words of Herodotus) is where agriculture had initially developed - a development which made the land of the Pharaohs the most commanding power of the ancient world. And so chapter eleven of the Book of Deuteronomy, in our portion of Eikev, provides a dazzling parallel (verses 8-12) to the passage we discussed earlier (8:7-9), similarly emphasizing the "defining and leading" word *eretz*, land.

Interestingly enough, in our passage where "*eretz*" is mentioned seven times, the land of Israel is the focus of all but one, the fourth time, when it refers to Egypt. On one level the contrast is between land and desert, but the Torah's intention is to provide a contrast between Egypt and Israel, the latter introduced as the "land flowing with milk and honey" (11:9). The Biblical text continues: "Because the land you are about to inherit is not like Egypt, the place you left, where you could plant your seed and irrigate it with your feet, just like a vegetable garden" (11:10). Since the fertility of Egyptian land and the cultivation of its crops does not depend on rainfall but is effectively irrigated by the Nile's natural overflow and from the omnipresent moisture of the great river, Egyptians did not need to turn to the heavens for rain.

However, while Egyptian land may be easily cultivated, it remains a dry, desert valley, unlike Israel, a land flowing with milk and honey: milk derived from livestock grazing on fields of natural growing grass and honey from bees that thrive in areas blessed by a natural abundance of flora. It may be difficult to live only on milk and honey - but it is possible. And more importantly: "The land you are crossing to occupy is a land of mountains and valleys, which can be irrigated only by rain. It is therefore a land constantly under the Lord your God's scrutiny; the eyes of the Lord your God are on it at all times, from the beginning of the year to the end of the year" (Deut. 11:11, 12).

Ancient Egypt had very little to offer in the God-human partnership. The rich, fertile soil of the 'gift of the Nile' makes the agricultural process a relatively simple one, its dependency on rain removed. Israel, abundant in its natural supply of resources, nevertheless must rely heavily both on plentiful rainfall as well as human input for a successful agricultural crop. And since Israel must rely on God - the obvious source for rain - the Israelites must be worthy of God's grace by dint of their ethical and moral conduct, their fealty to God's laws. Hence our Biblical portion concludes with a call to sensitive fulfillment of God's laws as the key to our successful harvesting of the land's produce. Perhaps this is really why Israel is called the land 'flowing with milk and honey: only milk and honey can be garnered without destroying any form of life whatsoever - human, animal or plant.