



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

46 Ekev — Ultimate Freedom

Text

דברים ח

ז כי יהוה אל ה'ך מביאך אל-ארץ טובה ארץ נחלי מים עינת ותה' מ'ת י'צאים בבקעה ובהר. ח ארץ חטה ושע'רה וגפן ותאנה ורמון ארץ-זית שמן ודבש. ט ארץ אשר ל'א במסכנת ת'אכל-בה לחם ל'א-תחסר כ'ל בה ארץ אשר אבניה ברזל ומהרריה תחצ'ב נח'שת. י ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את-יהוה אל ה'ך על-הארץ הט'בה אשר נתן-לך. יא השמר לך פן-תשכח את-יהוה אל ה'ך לבלתי שמ'ר מצו'תיו ומשפטיו וחק'תיו אשר אנ' כי מצו'ך היום. יב פן-ת'אכל ושבעת ובתים ט'בים תבנה וישבת. יג ובק'ך וצ'אנך ירב'נו וכסף וזהב ירבה-לך וכל אשר-לך ירבה. יד ורם לבבך ושכחת את-יהוה אל ה'ך המוציאך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים. טו המוליךך במדבר הגד'ל והנורא נחש שרף ועקרב וצמאון אשר אין-מים המוציא לך מים מצור החלמיש. טז המאכלך מן במדבר אשר ל'א-ידעון אב' תיך למען ענ'תך ולמען נס'תך להיטבך באחריתך. יז ואמרת בלבבך כ'חי וע'צם ידי עשה לי את-החיל הזה. יח וזכרת את-יהוה אל ה'ך כי הוא ה'נתן לך כ'ח לעשות חיל למען הקים את-בריתו אשר-נשבע לאב' תיך כיום הזה. //

דברים יא

ח ושמתם את-כל-המצוה אשר אנ' כי מצו'ך היום למען תחזקו ובאתם וירש'תם את-הארץ אשר אתם ע'ברים שמה לרש'תה. ט ולמען תאריכו ימים על-האדמה אשר נשבע יהוה לאב' תיכם לתת להם ולזרעם ארץ זבת חלב ודבש. {ס} י כי הארץ אשר אתה בא-שמה לרש'תה ל'א כארץ מצרים הוא אשר יצאתם משם אשר תזרע את-זרעך והשקית ברגלך כגן הירק. יא והארץ אשר אתם ע'ברים שמה לרש'תה ארץ הרים ובקע'ת למטר השמים תש'תה-מים. יב ארץ אשר-יהוה אל ה'ך ד'רש'א תה' תמיד עיני יהוה אל ה'ך בה מרשית השנה ועד אחרית שנה. {ס} יג והיה אם-שמ'ע תשמעו אל-מצו'תיו אשר אנ' כי מצוה אתכם היום לאהבה את-יהוה אל ה'יכם ולעבדו בכל-לבבכם ובכל-נפשכם. יד ונתתי מטר-ארצכם בעתו יורה ומלקוש ואספת דגנך ותיר' שך ויצ'הרך. טו ונתתי עשב בשדך לבהמתך ואכלת ושבעת. טז השמרו לכם פן יפתה לבבכם וסרתם ועבדתם אל הים אחרים והשתחוויתם להם. יז וחרה אף-יהוה בכם ועצר את-השמים ול'א-יהיה מטר והאדמה ל'א תתן את-יבולה ואבדתם מהרה מעל הארץ הט'בה אשר יהוה נתן לכם. יח ושמתם את-דברי אלה על-לבבכם ועל-נפשכם וקשרתם אתם לאות על-ידיכם והיו לטוטפ'ת בין עיניכם. יט ולמדתם אתם את-בניכם לדבר בם בשבתך בביתך ובלכתך בדרך ובשכבך ובקומך. כ וכתבתם על-מזוזות ביתך ובשעריך. כא למען ירבו ימיכם וימי בניכם על האדמה אשר נשבע יהוה לאב' תיכם לתת להם כימי השמים על-הארץ

Devarim 8

7 For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; 8 a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey; 9 a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper. 10 When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land which S/He has given you. 11 Take care lest you forget the Lord your God and fail to keep His/Her commandments, His/Her rules, and His/Her laws, which I enjoin upon you today. 12 When you have eaten your fill, and have



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built fine houses to live in, 13 and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, 14 beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God — who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; 15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its seraph serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock; 16 who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your ancestors had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end — 17 and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." 18 Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth, in fulfillment of the covenant that He made on oath with your ancestors, as is still the case.

19 If you do forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve them or bow down to them, I warn you this day that you shall certainly perish; 20 like the nations that the Lord will cause to perish before you, so shall you perish — because you did not heed the Lord your God. . . .

Devarim 11

8 Keep, therefore, all the commandments that I enjoin upon you today, so that you may have the strength to enter and take possession of the land that you are about to cross into and possess, 9 and that you may long endure upon the soil that the Lord swore to your ancestors to assign to them and to their heirs, a land flowing with milk and honey.

10 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 you watered by foot [irrigated yourself], like a vegetable garden; 11 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. 12 It is a land which the Lord your God looks after, on which the Lord your God always keeps His/Her eye, from year's beginning to year's end.

13 If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Her/Him with all your heart and soul, 14 I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil — 15 I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle — and thus you shall eat your fill. 16 Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. 17 For the Lord's anger will flare up against you, and S/He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you.

18 Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a -symbol on your forehead, 19 and teach them to your children — reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up; 20 and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates — 21 to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.



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Context

Parshat Ekev spells out the divine blessings accruing to the People – fulfilling the ancestral covenant. The blessings extend the miraculous Exodus from Egypt to dispossessing people in the Promised Land in order that the Israelites might inhabit it. The lush and fertile land will provide for all the Israelite needs. If the People forget that God is the source of their bounty and attaining the Land, they will suffer and perish. Moshe reminds the People of their rebelliousness, and how he mediated divine wrath in a series of incidents when they defied God. Moshe repeatedly atoned for their misdeeds, and led them to the Land. Now they must follow the divine path, obey the teachings, behave justly and kindly. The Exodus and the miracles that they witnessed bind them to love the divine and accept the commandments.

Explorations

Escape from slavery is not the ultimate goal of the Exodus from Egypt; the ultimate goal of the Exodus from Egypt is to arrive in and inhabit the Promised Land.

The goal of living in the land does not relate only to moving from one geographic space to another; it also relates to the way we understand ourselves in the world. Here we explore how Parshat Ekev prompts us to interpret our human condition and the potential role of Judaism in shaping the meaning of our lives.

Focusing on the Israelite destination, Parashat Ekev describes the resources, quality and productivity of the land. The Torah names seven species that typify native Israeli nourishment,



For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of **wheat** and **barley**, of **grapevines**, **figs**, and **pomegranates**, a land of **olive trees** and **[date] honey**; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper. (Devarim 8:7-9)

While the land is teeming with **streams and springs and fountains**, the Torah makes a very specific distinction between the Lands of Israel and Egypt - in terms of water,



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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 you watered by foot [irrigated yourself], 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/Her eye, from year's beginning to year's end. (Devarim 11:10-12)

Rashi explains this distinction,

[the land of Egypt...] which you watered by foot [irrigated yourself]: The land of Egypt required bringing water from the Nile by foot in order to water it; you had to rise from your sleep and toil. And only the low-lying areas were watered [i.e., irrigated by the Nile], but not the high land, so you had to carry up water from the lower to the higher areas. But this [land, namely Canaan] “absorbs water from the rains of heaven.” While you sleep in your bed, the Holy One, blessed is S/He, waters both low and high areas, both areas that are exposed and those that are not, all at once [Sifrei] like a vegetable garden: which does not have enough water from rain, and one has to water it by foot, [carrying water] upon one’s shoulder.

With rainfall scarce in Egypt, since ancient times, Egyptians rely upon the Nile River for sustenance. According to tradition, Pharaoh was responsible for instituting an ingenious irrigation system whereby channels fill to water the fields when the Nile reliably rises. Some conjecture that the channels were closed and opened by moving a pile of dirt to block or clear the water flow – with one's foot, a primitive faucet. Hence the Torah's expression, “watered by foot”. Apparently Rashi was not familiar with this Egyptian irrigation method. With such a reliable system, the Egyptians perceived themselves as self-sufficient. They viewed the Nile River as their provider and their Pharaoh as a god - the source of their prosperity (see photo on left - Sobek the Pharaonic god of Nile fertility). Though some might have had to carry water to their fields at higher elevations, water in Egypt is in constant and dependable supply.



By contrast with Egypt, in Israel, fruitful cultivation of the earth requires rain. Our parasha explains how rainfall in Israel depends upon divine blessing. The faucet of blessing flows when those who abide in the Land fulfill the obligations that the Torah teaches. This relationship of dependence and responsibility is explicit in a passage included in the twice-daily recitation of the Shema, a central credo of Jewish faith,



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If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the Lord your God and serving Her/Him with all your heart and soul, I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil — I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle — and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. For the Lord's anger will flare up against you, and S/He will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that the Lord is assigning to you. (Devarim 11:13-17)

According to this text, God rewards good behavior with fertility, and punishes unfaithfulness and misdeeds with drought. Many reject the simple meaning of this passage. In our mortal experience, the Torah's assertion of a direct causal relationship between good behavior and rain/ blessing is not credible. There is ancient evidence of awareness of this problem (see for example the Book of Job, and prophet Jeremiah 12:1). Rabbinic sages throughout the ages have amply pointed out the aching problem of apparent injustice – good behavior is often not rewarded, and bad behavior is often not punished.

In the Torah (Shmot 33:13), Moshe asks God to reveal 'His/Her Ways'. Rabbi Yossi explains that Moshe is requesting to understand reward and punishment,

Sovereign of the Universe, why is it that some righteous people prosper, while others suffer? Why do some wicked people prosper, and others suffer?" (Brakhot 7a).

Rabbi Yossi offers a couple of explanations that relate to previous deeds in the family, and possible events in the world-to-come. According to Rabbi Meir, God did not fulfill Moshe's request to explain the mechanism of suffering and reward in this world. Divine calculations about free will, and the influences of family, background, education, and society are beyond the grasp of all humans, even Moshe.

Let us consider other possible meanings for the distinction between Egypt and Israel in terms of water - reading them not as literal references to countries but as approaches or paradigms.

In the Egypt paradigm, water, and therefore sustenance do not depend on our action; in the Israel paradigm, rainwater is a medium, a currency for the human-divine connection. This approach links our most basic material need, food, with ethics and spirituality. In this world-view, our essential human condition is relational, not individual. This connectivity has two main dimensions. The Torah holds us fully accountable for our actions - as contributors or detractors, to our divine Creator who sustains us, and to our fellow human beings with whom our fate is bound.



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No person can view her/himself as an independent entity, pursuing personal goals separately. Avraham reveals this idea in his appeal to save Sodom and Amora - he proposes the potential of the merits of a group of righteous people to save all inhabitants from their awful demise (Ber. 18:22-32). The Torah delivers a message that divine blessing flows or is with-held in response to collective behavior. The communal obligations of living in the Land underline how we are all implicated together in an interdependent world.

Our text makes collective human vulnerability explicit and debunks the illusion of individual control over personal fate. Sun shines and rain falls on everyone. Our food supply and resources are shared. According to the Torah, our nurture and wellbeing depend on the ethical behavior and spiritual good sense of all of us.

Ecology is one easy access point to awareness of interdependence. The Reconstructionist Movement of Judaism initially rejected the second paragraph of the Shema on the grounds of the incompatibility of divine reward and punishment with its theology. Arthur Green convinced the movement to reinstate the paragraph on the grounds of ecology. The rationale is that linking events in “the natural order” to human activity carries a compelling message for moderns: continue to pollute the environment and, “There will be no more rain and the ground will not yield its produce.” Green and many others also argue that that the [collective] morality of Jewish behavior in the Land of Israel is relevant to modern Zionism.

Indeed, nearly every aspect of our lives, choices and behavior is interdependent – the way we consume, for example, affects everyone's resources and lives, now and in the future. Though smoking or junk food might seem to be personal freedoms or choices, the detriment to health in society, the shifting of resources to the production of unhealthy goods, the destruction to the environment entailed in packaging and distribution, and the burden for health care costs – these are eventually borne by all, even those who choose a healthy lifestyle. The American debate about the social implications and dear costs of upholding individual “freedom” to bear arms is another current example.

Among the triggers of our collective amnesia about interdependence and vulnerability are wealth and success. Moshe anticipates that the people are likely to become self-congratulatory during times of material prosperity and think that they are the ultimate source of their supposed flourishing – as the Egyptians believed. Moshe warns the people against haughtiness,

And you will say in your heart, ‘My strength and the might of my hand did for me this greatness.’” (Devarim 8:17)

When Moshe prepares the people to enter the Land of Israel, he explains that their material prosperity depends on adherence to the covenant, to responsible partnership. Moshe suggests how the divine-human relationship resembles a parent-child connection,



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Bear in mind that the Lord your God disciplines you just as a person disciplines his/her child. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God: walk in His/Her ways and revere Her/Him. (Devarim 11:5-6)

Whereas for modern Western culture, the individual is the foundation of society, the Torah works from a premise of interdependence. In our time, these very different approaches have accumulated gender nuances. Psychoanalytic tradition, for example, explains the emergence of the boy child's separate identity by “splitting” from his mother, whereas a girl child continues to evolve her complex relationship with her mother even as she develops her own identity (Nancy Choderow, *The Reproduction of Mothering*). Society imprints its priorities, values, and expectations by complex and subtle means. Gender patterns are one of the core methods by which views about human nature and the human condition are socialized. In our social molds, connection and commitment are often gendered female. In the Torah, committed relationship and social responsibility are at the core of the human condition – to the divine, and to human society. The priorities of family, childrearing, and spiritual inheritance are central to Bereishit, for example, as *human* concerns for both men and women - they are not gendered as women's priorities.

Parshat Ekev offers an enlarged perspective on the process of liberation from slavery. From an individualist perspective, the obligations set out in the Torah and the binding covenant appear to be a burden rather than a release. From a perspective of connection and commitment, the parasha proposes a fertile and intimate interrelationship among People, Land and the divine. In this context, inhabiting the Land proposes the opportunity and challenge to pursue and refine our behavior, celebrating the joy of sharing responsibility – this is an inspiring conception of ultimate freedom.

Questions for Discussion

In what areas of our lives do we claim credit for our prosperity? In addition to our efforts, structural inequalities in society and unequal access to resources often determine our success. When we encounter those who are not as successful as we, to what do we attribute their lack of success? When can we rightfully attribute failure and success to our own efforts and hard work and when do structural and circumstantial factors determine the extent of our success? Discuss your views about divine control over prosperity and failure.

Throughout the year, there are fruit ready for snacking in Israel, if not fresh in season – pomegranates and grapes, loquats, pears, apples, then sun-dried on the tree – almonds, carob, dates, figs, walnuts etc. Wild raspberries and blackberries are also plentiful in the summer and autumn on many hiking paths. In addition, there is a bounty of fresh cultivated fruit of both earth and trees throughout long growing seasons in Israel's varied climactic zones. Advanced Israeli agriculture cultivates and reaps abundance. Explore your



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familiarity with the native harvest of your land – wild and cultivated. Discuss the natural produce in your locality, its seasons and availability, and associated culinary traditions. Compare and contrast the growing cycle in your area with the wet-dry, cold-hot seasons of Israel. How do these processes of nourishment affect your life and relationship to the earth?



Understanding the covenant as fostering our sense of moral and ethical accountability can inspire us to act more responsibly towards one another and our environment, appreciating that our prosperity is interdependent. How might we extend the idea of covenant beyond the people and land of Israel to humanity throughout the world?

Jewish events often end in heaps of plastic bags filled with disposed plastic, styrofoam, and paper waste. How can you contribute toward implementing more earth-friendly practices in your community, and infuse your Jewish observances with an awareness of your covenantal obligation to jointly nurture a healthy interdependency with our natural environment?

Study Links

This essay, [“Reward and Punishment in this World”](#) interprets rabbinic views.

Read [this excerpt](#) from Rabbi Harold Kushner's bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: Suffering is meaningless unless you decide otherwise.

[Here](#) is a discussion of the process in the Reconstructionist Movement removing and then reinstated the second paragraph of the Shema – on the basis of concern about the damage humanity is causing to the globe.

Learn about and become engaged in environmental issues in Israel. Though rainfall in the 2012-13 winter season has been filling Lake Kinneret and the aquifers, water scarcity continues to affect the lives of all of the inhabitants of Israel and is an ongoing source of contention among Arabs and Jews in the area. Two websites to check to learn how to support environmental initiatives in Israel are: [Adam Teva V'Din: The Israel Union for Environmental Defense](#), and the [Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel](#).



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Among the sections of the Israel-Jordan Peace Treaty, Article 6 deals with water resources:

Recognizing the rightful water allocations of both of them in the Jordan River and Yarmouk River waters and Arabah (Arava) ground water and development of new water resources.

Annex II entitled “Water Related Matters” describes in detail the dates and quantities of water allocations between the two states. See the [full text of the Treaty](#).

See this article on “[Gender Identity](#)” formation by Carolyn Barber, and this guide to “[Psychological Explanations of Gender Development](#)”.

INTERDEPENDENCE DAY

In a world where global interdependence is not simply an aspiration of idealists, but a brute fact of the forces that bind us together—global warming, financial capital, AIDS, telecommunications, crime, migration, and terrorism—many people still think in narrow, insular terms.

[Learn about Interdependence Day.](#)

Summary of Issues

The process of inhabiting the Land of Israel attempts to fulfill the ancestral promise, the Exodus from slavery, and Jewish destiny. An alternative to individualism and existential loneliness, this parasha envisions living in the Land as a sublime covenantal partnership. The Torah positions each person in a relationship of accountability and interdependence with Creation and Creator.

Methods & Observations

Often there are texts in the Torah that seem to counter our experience, such as claims about divine reward and punishment. Rather than dismissing passages as primitive or naïve, reading for meaning in ancient sources can be a rewarding challenge.

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Contact

Please address queries and comments to
Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman - bonnadevora@gmail.com