Drash for Parashat Eikev, given July 31,2021

Today is my mother’s yahrzeit. Her name is Sara bat Shmuel HaCohen v Feige. She was always interested in other people and when her husband took her away from her New York community, she found community at Mosaic Law Congregation in Sacramento where I grew up. It was to keep her legacy alive that I began greeting on Shabbat here at Netivot Shalom 20 years ago and look where that has led me! This drash is dedicated to her memory.

Parashat Eikev, does not contain the hit parade of last week’s parashah. Instead, it is a recap of the Israelites’ journey through the wilderness and repeatedly emphasizes the need to remember God’s commandments and that the rewards in our lives come from God and not because of our own merit.

I became interested in this parashah because of the passage near the end, which the rabbis of old felt was necessary to be included in our daily recital of the Shma. This recital of the Shma is not just the Shma itself but also the three separate Torah passages which follow it. The first we know well. Even those of us who do not leyn Torah can chant the VeAhavta because it is chanted aloud much of the time. Most of us are also familiar with the 3rd passage, from Numbers, with its repeated mention of the tzitzit and the last few words are usually chanted aloud by the Shaliach Tzibur.

The second paragraph, the one which is from this week’s parashah = well, if you are like me, you probably skip over this passage most of the time, or at best skim it. Why is that? One reason for me is that I am trying to keep up in the service and I do not know this passage very well. And why don’t I know this passage? Why is this passage, which is important enough to be included in the Shma, not chanted or recited aloud?

Let’s look at this paragraph. (If you want, you can find this passage on page 156 in our siddur) The problem is immediately apparent. It starts off with a promise that we will be rewarded if we follow God’s commandments but will be punished if we don’t. (And here I will tie in with Rabbi Chai’s drash from last week) We are 21rst century Jews. We no longer believe in a God who rewards and punishes. I did when I was a child. I thoughtlessly ate a hot dog at a friend’s house during Passover – two no-nos – pork and a bun. I was terrified that God would punish me, but it was my own sense of guilt that made me nauseous. Today, the idea that God punishes us is uncomfortable if not unbelievable.

What else is bothersome in this paragraph? The passage about worshiping false gods. Again, we are 21rt century Jews. Idol worshiping and other gods are distant relics.

But look at this section again. In a translation by Joel Hoffman, these are the lines in question:

“Take care lest your mind tempt you to rebel by worshipping other gods and bowing down to them. For then the fire and fury of Adonai will turn against you. Adonai will stop the flow of the sky. There will be no rain. The earth will not grant its produce.

I don’t know about you, but since last year, with the orange sky, and the fires, and longstanding drought, which continues to this day, with devastating fires in the Northwest and almost unbearable heat waves, it is now hard for me to ignore this paragraph. It makes me think about the mitzvot about caring for the earth and each other, especially with the approaching Shmitah year.

And what about worshipping other gods? The sidebar of Siddur Lev Shalem quotes Abraham Joshua Heschel. “What is an idol? A thing, a force, a person, a group, an institution or an ideal regarded as supreme. God alone is supreme.”

In the divisiveness of the past few years, many of us have spent a lot of time on political activity in the name of Tikkun Olam. But Dr. Yehuda Kurtzer of the Shalom Hartman Institute of North America, has raised the question whether our commitment to a political party, and the othering of those who hold another party affiliation, is not a form of idolatry, conflating political values with religious ones, and political identity with religious identity.

But my goal today is not to discuss climate change, or idolatry, though these are subjects which deserve further discussion. I really want to talk about prayer. When prayer services took the place of daily sacrifice, the purpose was the same – to help us draw closer to God, and to remember our Covenant. The essential components of the service are the Shma, with its three Torah passages, and the Amidah, a collection of petitionary prayers and praises of God’s actions and attributes which speak to our place in God’s creation.

The Shma’s three paragraphs were chosen to emphasize the importance of the study of Torah, the need to do the mitzvot, and an admonishment to remember. I think that the Shma is telling us that faith is not enough without the mitzvot which guide us in how to live. That our actions in the world have consequences, both individual and small, and communal and large. And we need the twice daily reminder of this because we get distracted and forget – all the time.

The rabbis of old (and today) kept trying to find ways to improve our prayers, to make us ready to focus on the Shma and the Amidah. They added passages of Talmud, of Psalms, of the prophets, and created a symphony to lead us up to and take us down from the intensity of those essential prayers. Many of their personal prayers were added to enhance kavanah, The Shaliach Tzibur is the conductor who creates the mood, chooses what to emphasize, and keeps us together.

But what happens when the sheer number of prayers gets in the way; when we must skim or skip in order to keep up with our prayer leaders. While many of us can recite all the prayers with the appropriate intention, others of us go through the motions, catching what we can, and finding our closeness to God by being a part of this community. This is enough for some, but others may wish for more. Or what happens when the metaphors in the liturgy are upsetting, or challenging, as in today’s paragraph? We don’t have time to wrestle with them every day.

Lawrence Hoffman, in his introduction to Volume 1 of his Minhag Ami, My People’s prayer book, describes prayer, in the days before the prayer service was set, as being akin to a jazz ensemble, with the Shaliach Tzibur carrying the melody line that others improvise around. Yes, we need to ultimately get to the same place, at the same time, but we can take different ways to get there. Rabbi Richard Levy, z”l, taught that we do not have to keep up with the kahal, or to say every prayer. He urged us to pause when a prayer speaks to us, linger and let it inhabit us. On any given day, a different prayer may grab our attention. Depending on our individual needs and concerns we may be drawn to specific prayers which will bring us, individually, closer to God, and help us remember our covenantal blessings and responsibilities.

I find, on many days, that the prayers of gratitude speak to me the most. However, when I started to work on this drasha, a different prayer called to me, the one we recite at the end of the morning Amidah. This prayer begins with Sim Shalom B’Olam- grant peace to the world. But the part that speaks to me today harkens back to the meaning of the Shma : “ Barchenu Avinu kulano k’echad b’or panecha; ki v’or panecha natata lanu, Adonai Elohenu, torat chaim v’ahavat hesed, u’tzedakah, u’vracha, v’rahamim v’chaim v’shalom - ,” Bless us, our creator, united as one with the light of Your presence: by that light, Adonai, our God, You have given us a guide to life - the love of kindness, righteousness, blessing, compassion, life and peace. “

To paraphrase the ending of the second paragraph of the Shma, with which I opened this drash , May we all be blessed with the light of God’s presence, and keep that light with us, as we sit at home, as we walk by the way, so that our days, and our children’s days may be as numerous as the days that the sky overlooks the earth.

Amen