

Parshat Ekev  
August 5, 2023

The name of this parsha, Ekev, literally means “on the heels of.” You may remember a Biblical child, a twin, born clinging to the heel of his brother, the first born. His parents, Isaac and Rebecca, named him Yaakov, after this same word Ekev or “heel.” Uri Alter tells us that this is an unusual Hebrew preposition and translates it “in consequence of.” Some translators use the words “as a result.”

No matter how it’s translated, Moses tells the people very clearly what will happen to them and to their relationship with God” in consequence of” or “as a result of” future good actions and any potential bad ones as well, what will befall them “on the heels” of the way they behave.

Moses lays out the Quid Pro Quo, Latin for “something for something.” If the Children of Israel do something or act in a certain way, their behavior will encourage or provoke God to act a certain way in return. When I mentioned this to my husband Ed, a scholar of Asian religions, he said, “Oh, like Jewish karma. Karma translates as actions and the consequence of those actions.”

We are told in the very first few verses of our parsha that if the Israelites heed the laws they have been given, then God will “love them, bless them and multiply them.” Moses goes on to specify: The soil will be fruitful, giving them grain, wine and oil. There will be no infertility among either humans or animals. The people will be immune to the bad diseases which were rampant in Egypt and better still, these diseases will inflict their enemies.

But what does it mean that the Children of Israel should “heed the laws?” It’s not just following the 10 commandments which they were given fairly recently. God – through Moses – ups the ante. By the 5<sup>th</sup> verse of the parshah the Children of Israel are told they will need to – in Uri’s translation – “devour all the peoples that the Lord your God is about to give to you. Your eye shall not pity them and you shall not worship their gods.” They are commanded to not only destroy all the indigenous graven images, but even to destroy any gold and silver that was on these images, lest they be ensnared by it.

I don’t know about you, but to me, the first part of this demand is the challenge. I could pass on the silver and gold but to me devouring the native peoples of the land and doing it without pity is something that I can’t reconcile with my 21<sup>st</sup> century sensibility. More on this later.

By the end of chapter 8 this Quid Pro Quo is expanded. The Israelites are clearly told what will happen as the result of their actions if they fail to follow the rules:

*“If you indeed forget the Lord your God and go after other gods and worship them and bow to them, I bear witness against you today that you shall surely perish. Like the nations that the Lord causes to perish before you, so shall you perish, inasmuch as you would not heed the voice of the Lord your God.”*

What we’ve been reading is a description of a belief in causality that may have made sense to our ancestors but I admit, it doesn’t make sense to me. Perhaps my faith is weak. Or perhaps I live

in 2023. But I can't wrap my head around thinking that sometimes things, both bad and good, just happen, and they really aren't a result of our actions.

Some of you may know or have seen my name on the the mi sheberach list or suspect from looking at my chic short hairdo, that I've had health challenges over the last year and a half. And this isn't the first time. All my doctors assure me that the first time I got sick and the second have nothing to do with each other. Or as one doctor told me, "It's just bad luck twice." And not one of those doctors suggested that I got sick because I ate wrong or didn't exercise enough or was born with less than fantastic genes or because first year of the pandemic I skipped building a sukkah the or didn't give money to a homeless man I saw or failed to let a driver merge in front of me in heavy traffic – or even because I committed sins worse than these or that anything I did caused me to get sick. It just happened.

Sometimes we look for causality that is as clear as that laid out to the Children of Israel in the desert. We look for an explanation for things that can't be explained. Forty-some years ago my brother and his wife suffered the tragedy of losing a baby to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. Wanting to be helpful, I went out and bought Rabbi Harold Kushner's then new book, When Bad things Happen to Good People. Before I sent it to them, I read it myself. I only remember one thing from the book, two vignettes of shiva calls Rabbi Kushner had made as a congregational rabbi near Boston. In the first, the grieving adult child said to the rabbi, "If only I'd insisted my mother had spent the winter in Florida, she wouldn't have died." In the second, another grieving adult child said to the rabbi, "Why did I ever suggest my dad move to Florida? If he'd stayed in Boston he'd be alive today." Rabbi Kushner's point, of course, was that these parents did not die as a result of the actions of their children. And they probably didn't die either because an anthropomorphic deity in the sky with a big ledger book decided their fate based on their actions. That Rosh HaShana/ Yom Kippur image worked well for me when it was presented to me in Sunday School at age 6 or 7, but somewhere along the line, I grew out of it. My belief now, though probably not the belief of many literal readers of the Bible or perhaps of yours, is that life is far more complicated than a series of quid pro quo contractual transactions with God where God responds to every human action.

So why does Moses lay out the future in such black and white terms to the people shortly before he dies? Or looking at it another way, how can those of us without Moses' adamant view of causality, who believe that sometimes things "just happen" and that not every good or bad thing occurs because of something one does, how can we read these first few lines of Parshat Ekev?

One helpful thing to keep in mind is that Moses' audience is a young nation, really just in their toddlerhood. As those of you who are parents or remember seeing parents interacting with children or were yourselves once children know, it's important to teach toddlers that actions have consequences.

If you eat your carrots, we can go to the park. If not we're staying home.

If you swallow this medicine, you'll feel better tomorrow.

If you and your sister don't share the toys you already have, we won't go to Mr. Mopps to buy a new box of legos.

If you make a huge mess when you go over to your friend's house, his mom won't invite you over again.

Not only is it common for interpreters of Torah to reframe God's relationship with the Children of Israel as that of one between a parent and a child, but we even find the same insight in our parshah. In chapter 8, verse 5 we read: "Bear in mind that the Lord your God disciplines you just as man disciplines his son."

So developmentally as a people, the Children of Israel need to be told that if they act appropriately, good things will follow and if they don't, there will be consequences.

But perhaps there is at least one other reason that the Children of Israel need to hear that if only they follow God's rules and do as instructed, everything will go well for them. These people are frightened and are badly in need of a pep talk. They have been wandering pretty aimlessly in the desert for decades, have no military experience and are armed with a scouting report that is 40 years out of date. They know they are outnumbered and that their adversaries have the advantage of knowing the home terrain. They really need to be commanded to devour the people and to fight without pity and be told that if only they follow God's commandments, they will be victorious. They need to be told that everything is going to be all right and that soon they will once again live safely in the land promised to their forefathers.

Moses reminds them in Chapter 7, starting at verse 17:

*Should you say to yourselves "These nations are more numerous than we; how can we dispossess them? You need have no fear of them. You have but to bear in mind what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and all the Egyptians. The wonderful acts that you saw with your own eyes, the signs and the portents, the mighty hand and the outstretched arm by which the Lord your God liberated you. Thus will the Lord your God do to all the peoples you now fear.*

They need their pre-game pep talk from the coach before the big game. Soon they will have to walk up to the walls of Jericho believing that those walls are going to crumble once the rams' horns begin to sound simply because the people have done everything that God has asked of them and in exchange, they are going to be victorious.

The world may not work as simply as the quid pro quo laid out by Moses where if you do as you're asked, God will do the rest, but sometimes, you've just gotta believe.