

*Eikev, Deuteronomy 7:12–11:25*  
*The Torah: A Modern Commentary*, pp. 1,379–1,408;  
Revised Edition, pp. 1,226–1,250  
Haftarah, Isaiah, 49:14–51:3

**God's Call to Battle! God's Demand for Compassion!**  
By Michael Z. Cahana

**FOCAL POINT |**

\* You shall destroy all the peoples that the Eternal your God delivers to you, showing them no pity. (Deuteronomy 7:16)

\* But [God] upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger. . . . You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 10:18–19)

**D'VAR TORAH |**

We are in the second Shabbat of Consolation, but you'd never know it from reading this Torah portion. For seven weeks following Tishah B'Av, the haftarah readings offer special words of consolation to the Jewish people as they mourn the destruction of the Temple. The loss of Zion represented a loss of power and independence. But the Torah portion is anything but mournful or consoling. It is a stirring speech filled with violent imagery, severe admonitions, and promises of great power. A greater "rallying of the troops" message would be hard to find.

Usually, I recommend a close reading of the text—picking apart a portion line by line. But *Parashat Eikev* shows a literary artistry that also demands a reading of the text as a whole. Fear and pride, promise and rejection—each emotional string is plucked at just the right moment. In the end we can hear a roar of thunderous approval from the multitude, pitched as they were on the edge of the Promised Land they were preparing to conquer. Moses, continuing his Deuteronomic speech, focuses on God's promise to redeem the children of slaves and, through battle, bring them to possess God's own land.

Here's my suggestion: for once, don't read with a critical eye. The first time through, put yourself into the story. Stand at the foot of the mountain among the throngs who have traveled so far and endured so much hardship. Listen to Moses as he proclaims:

\* You shall be blessed above all other peoples. (Deuteronomy 7:14)

\* For the Eternal your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and spring and fountains issuing from plain and hill. (Deuteronomy 8:7)

\* Hear, O Israel! You are about to cross the Jordan to go in and dispossess nations greater and more populous than you. (Deuteronomy 9:1)

\* Know then this day that none other than the Eternal your God is crossing at your head, a devouring fire. (Deuteronomy 9:3)

\* No one shall stand up to you: the Eternal your God will put the dread and the fear of you over the whole land in which you set foot, as promised. (Deuteronomy 11:25)

Okay now, catch your breath. Yes, you can put on your twenty first century glasses. Considering this text during a time of war, when there are grave doubts about our reasons for going to war and living with great uncertainty about the future, this can be a very hard text to digest. Indeed, in the United States we remember just a few years ago when stirring political speeches indicated the desperate need for a military course of action and certainly for our success. In hindsight both are in doubt. So what do we make of a Torah portion that calls, in no uncertain terms, for brutal war?

We can choose to pay attention to other details. We can focus on the miracle of clothing that did not wear out for forty years in the wilderness (Deuteronomy 8:4) and the commandment to say a blessing after the meal to thank God for the food we eat (Deuteronomy 8:10). Even Moses's highly dramatic first-person account of the sin of the Golden Calf (Deuteronomy 9:7–21) makes for a nice diversion. This is a time-honored way to deal with our discomfort.

Another, as I suggested earlier, is to simply appreciate without judgment the literary flow and recognize the artistry of the speech of incitement—at times necessary, and certainly powerful.

A third, which is harder, is to recognize and engage the contradiction contained in the very name of the portion, *Eikev*, "following on the heels of." *Eikev* literally implies a direct consequence, as follows: "And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, the Eternal your God . . . will favor you and bless you and multiply you. . . . The Eternal will ward off from you all sickness" (Deuteronomy 7:12–13, 7:15). But as we know, life does not have such "if . . . then" certainties. There are many who are blessed and many who struggle—adherence to ritual law seems to have little correlation. Yet, even as we recognize the inadequacy of the logic, we can embrace the promise of the covenantal relationship that is at the heart of Judaism. "The Eternal your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant made on oath with your fathers" (Deuteronomy 7:12). It is this fact, this sense of engaged relationship that matters. We are, after all, *Yisrael*, "the one who wrestles with God." We

can disagree with our texts, we can struggle with their modern-day application. But in the end, we are led to relationship.

Like any human relationship, filled with contradictions, our relationship with God can be complex. A serious approach to Torah demands that we engage in those contradictions just as we engage with God out of love that demands of God just as God demands of us: with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our might.

“And now, O Israel, what does the Eternal your God demand of you? Only this: to revere the Eternal your God, to walk only in divine paths, to love and to serve the Eternal your God with all your heart and soul” (Deuteronomy 10:12).

### **BY THE WAY |**

I saw [Ben-Gurion] making peace, and I saw him making war. He mobilized me before the war. The man was a very rare combination between a real intellectual and a born leader. There is a contradiction between the two. (Interview with Shimon Peres, The Academy of Achievement, [www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/per0int-3](http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/page/per0int-3))

### **YOUR GUIDE |**

1. Walking in “God’s path” can be complicated, and different views about this have been held in different eras. How does the verse from Deuteronomy 10:12 (quoted above) compare with Micah 6:8, “It has been told you, O mortal, what is good, and what the Eternal requires of you—Only this: to do justly, and love mercy, and walk humbly with your God”?
2. In his speech, Moses reassures the people that they will be successful against the Anakites, the very nation that the spies of a generation earlier had warned against. Compare Numbers 13:25–33 to Deuteronomy 9:1–3. Why didn’t Moses express this kind of confidence in God the first time that the people were ready to enter the Land?

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**EAT, DRINK, AND BE MERRY, BUT BE SURE TO  
PAY THE BILL!**  
**Claire G. Metzger**

### **FOCAL POINT |**

\* When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty

and you forget Adonai your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage. (Deuteronomy 8:12–14)

### **D'VAR TORAH |**

In Eikev, Moses tells the Children of Israel that they will soon enter the Promised Land. After forty years of wandering in the desert and experiencing many trials from which they emerge—sometimes imperfectly—God now allows them to take the next step. In this chapter, Moses also reminds the people to follow God’s laws, for if they do, they will have everything they’ve ever wanted: they will have wealth and well-being. But at the same time, the Children of Israel must not become complacent: they must remember that good fortune is a gift from God that is not attained through their own merits.

Even today, it’s easy to become complacent when things are going well. We work hard to achieve all the things we acquire in life, so why not just sit back and enjoy ourselves? After all, we did it on our own; God had nothing to do with our success. By the same token, we tend to only think of and be grateful to God when times are tough or when we’ve gotten out of a jam. We are grateful to God when a loved one has recovered from illness or when we get hired in a bad job market. And as Americans, our standard of living is higher than that of most other people in the world. We have fine houses, plenty of food, and lots of “things.” Eikev reminds us that we must be thankful to God for our blessings.

How can we show our appreciation? In Eikev, we see that one way to show our appreciation to God is to give thanks for the food we eat. Eikev is considered to be the source for the Birkat HaMazon, the “Blessing after Meals.” We also show our appreciation for all the good things in life by following the mitzvot, “commandments,” and performing *g’milut chasadim*, “good deeds.” We can use our wealth and our influence to help others who are not as fortunate as we are.

In Eikev, Moses tells the people that they are being tested. How can success be a test? When we are successful, we tend to become complacent and blind to the troubles of others. And it’s so easy to lose focus on what’s important. We live in an age of constant stimuli and are constantly bombarded by television, Internet, radio, and print messages that instill hunger, greed, and fear. We see advertisements for clothes, toys, cars, and cosmetics and feel we must spend our lives pursuing these material goods. We see images of models, actors, and other luminaries that urge us to aspire to unrealistic definitions of power and beauty.

By the same token, the news media provide us with a constant stream of negative information about our world. We see footage from the Middle East—in some cases extremely graphic footage of violence and destruction. Local news is replete with murders, fires, layoffs, homelessness, and the list goes on and on. After a while, it is very easy to become numb to all of these stimuli. We can't solve all of the world's problems, so why not just try to deal with our own lives and ignore the rest? Living in New England, how can I help someone in Georgia who has lost all his or her possessions in a fire? How can I help the family of a soldier who has died in Iraq?

There are many things we all can and should do to help others. If we ignore the cries of others, we are guilty of taking God's graciousness for granted. We hurt God and ourselves by doing so. It is said, "One who causes the loss of even one life, it is as if that person caused the loss of an entire world, and one who saves one life, it is as if that person saved an entire world" (Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin 37a). We have to take the needs of others into our hearts and souls.

#### **BY THE WAY |**

\* The Sages tell of a man who was taken for judgment before a king. The man had three good friends who had always come to his aid. He begged his best friend to go with him to the king. His friend answered, "I will not go with you, even for one step." He approached the second friend, who said, "I will go with you to the king's door." The third friend told him, "I will accompany you to the king's chamber, but I cannot speak for you." Then the person remembered a friend whom he had not thought much of. He approached him and said, "Come with me before the king." "Although you always thought nothing of me," the friend replied, "nevertheless I will go before the king with you and speak for you." So too, when a person dies, his best friend, whom he loves most, that is, his money, does not go with him for even one step. His second friend, his relatives, his wife and children, go with him to the tomb. His shrouds are his third friend, accompanying him to the king, but not speaking for him. But the friend he did not think much of—charity and good deeds—these go with him before God's judgment and save him from death. (Proverbs 10:2)

\* Rabbi Shimon says: If three have eaten at the same table and have not spoken words of Torah there, it is as if they have eaten of offerings to the dead idols, as it is said: For all tables are full of vomit and filth, without the Omnipresent (Isaiah 28:8). But if three have eaten at the same table and have spoken words of Torah there, it is as if they have eaten from the table of the Omnipresent, as it is said: And he said

to me, "This is the table that is before Hashem ." (Ezekiel 41:22) ("The Pirkei Avos Treasury"/ Ethics of the Fathers [Brooklyn, NY: Mesorah Publications, Ltd.,1995] pp. 141–42)

\* "Who steals my purse steals trash. T'was mine, 'tis his, and has been slave to thousands, but he who filches from me my good name, robs me of that which not enriches him, and leaves me poor indeed." (From Hamlet , by William Shakespeare)

#### **YOUR GUIDE |**

1. How do charity and good deeds help us praise God? What can you do in your own community to give thanks for all the wonderful things you have?
2. How does saying the Birkat HaMazon , "Blessing after Meals," make a meal more holy? Do you think incorporating this or other blessings into your daily life would make your life more meaningful?
3. Shakespeare tells us that a good name is much more important than wealth. How does tzedakah help us have a good name? Is having a good name equivalent with praising and thanking God?

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#### **FROM THE MUNDANE TO THE HOLY: REMEMBERING ORIGINS**

*Nancy Flam*

Recently my four-year-old daughter told me that she knew the meaning of "all the blessings: The morning blessing [*Modeh/Modah Ani*] means 'Thank you, God, for giving me a new day.' The Shema means 'God, You are everywhere and in everything, and You are all of it.' And the blessing before dinner means 'Thank you, God, for dinner.' " One might quibble with my child's translations, but her *kavanah* [intention and focus] is clear.

When she gets older, I hope we will study this week's parashah together. It gives the basis for blessing God after (and, by extension, before) eating. Every time we eat, we are to remember the Source of our nourishment. The Talmud teaches us that a person who does not thank God before eating is like a robber, taking something that is not his or hers. (Berachot 35a) In Psalms it says, "All the earth is God's, and everything that is in it." (24:1) Every act of eating should remind us of our Creator. As one Chasidic commentator explains, even "the ox knows its owner." (Isaiah 1:3) Therefore, shouldn't we, too, be able to acknowledge the Source of our nourishment? (from Otzar Hehasidim, as quoted in Iturei Torah)

The command to thank God for the food we eat is embedded in God's instruction to the twelve tribes to enter the Land of Israel and conquer it. The land is described as a good land, with plenty of water and choice fruits, a land that will yield in abundance. God is telling this generation of desert wanderers that the time of scarcity and anxiety about food and water will soon cease. God reminds the people, "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to God for the good land that God has given you." (Deuteronomy 8:10)

The Torah expresses the concern that once we reach satiety, we will forget to thank God for all the good things we have been given. It is one matter to turn to God during a time of scarcity and need ("no atheists in foxholes") but another to remember God during a time of plenty. How easy it is for us to think that God plays no part in our hard-earned abundance. "Remember," the Torah tells us, "that it is God who gives you the power to get wealth." (Deuteronomy 8:18) Saying blessings upon eating and upon any other enjoyment is an exercise in remembering the ultimate origin of all good things.

A blessing before eating and a brief word of thanks afterward can deepen the daily spiritual practice of Reform Jews. I do not mean a rote recitation: I mean a real slowing down, a deepening breath, a metaphoric bow of gratitude from deep within. We need this kind of practice to link us to the Source of creation, to remind us of how much we depend on God for all that we enjoy, and to help us see that God's hidden miracles are, in the words of the Modim prayer, "with us morning, noon, and night."

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#### **HOW TO TEACH OUR CHILDREN** ***Michael Zeldin***

A child's pet dies. Two children begin to fight in the middle of the game they are playing. A teenager witnesses a car accident. These are all what educators sometimes refer to as "teachable moments," times in a young person's life that leave the child or adolescent particularly open to learning about life. What distinguishes excellent teachers from those who are merely competent is their ability to use these "teachable moments." And what makes some homes rich environments for learning and growth is the fact that the parents in these families are constantly on the lookout for "teachable moments."

What should we teach during these "teachable moments"? The Torah would have us teach mitzvot-opportunities for moral and ethical behavior. In looking at what he calls "the moral archaeology of childhood," Robert Coles emphasizes the need for this type of teaching by pointing out one of the dangers of contemporary life-the tendency to psychologize every issue and problem. Instead, this Harvard psychiatrist argues, we parents and teachers would be well advised to look at children's behavior through moral lenses and strive to help children develop character in addition to being psychologically healthy.

The parashah gives us a clue about how to teach our children. It reminds us to be on the lookout for everyday events whose significance we can highlight in the same way that some teachers and parents look for "teachable moments." We might call such opportunities "moral moments," small events in our daily lives that invite us to attach a larger significance to them. "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to God," invites us to make every meal a "moral moment." Ramban, however, tells us that this verse is not merely suggesting that we bring greater meaning into our lives. He places this verse in a category together with others that may at first seem to be merely suggestions, and he calls all of them mitzvot. Adding moral meaning to our lives is not just a fine thing to do: It is the essence of leading a life of Torah, a Jewish life.

While the Torah clearly wants us to teach our children to find spiritual meaning in life, the main thrust of its teachings is that we ourselves need to search for that meaning. Eating our fill and then giving thanks to God may be an opportunity to teach, but primarily it is an imperative to us to embrace every moment as the chance to search for the right way to live. Saying the Motzi or Birkat Hamazon is not merely an opportunity to teach our children. Each of these-and "all the blessings" that Rabbi Flam's daughter knows the meaning of-is an invitation to us to live more attuned to the moral purpose of our lives. And one of the fortuitous by-products of living our lives in search of "moral moments" is that in the process, we will show our children how to live meaningful spiritual lives.

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FROM HEEL TO SOUL  
Steve Chester

This week's parashah derives its name from the second word in the portion, ekev. (Deuteronomy 7:12) Ekev is usually translated as "if" or "in consequence of." However, the literal meaning of the word is "heel." Ekev comes from

the same root as Ya'akov, Jacob, who was so named because he was holding on to the heel of his twin Esau as the two of them emerged from their mother's womb. Therefore, if we use the literal meaning of ekev, we can read Deuteronomy 7:12 as "And it will come to pass on the heel of your hearkening to these rules...."

We know that nothing in life occurs by itself, nothing exists in a vacuum. Everything occurs ekev--on the heel of everything else. As we go through life, we are always dependent on someone or something. As we strive to achieve our goals, we are attached to one another and to God. We are constantly holding on to the heels of others.

This is apparent when we contemplate something as mundane as bread. Bread doesn't suddenly appear on our table. Someone has to plant and water the seed, harvest the wheat, knead the dough, and bake the bread. Soil, sun, and water are also needed to make the wheat grow. If one step is left out of the process, if one heel is not grasped, then the bread would not reach our table. Yet, according to Abraham Joshua Heschel, that is not enough. We must also bless the bread; only by doing so can we consciously recognize how holy the bread is--how much a role God had in helping us bring this bread to our table. To attain holiness we must recognize that we do not accomplish things alone and that we always have to grasp the heels of others or of God.

In this context ekev, "heel," teaches us how to make decisions that are in accordance with our concept of God. If God is compassionate, then we should be compassionate; if God is just, then we should be just. We are instructed to walk in God's ways. Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov in his commentary on the first verse of Ekev states: "For the conjunction 'because' the Scripture uses the expression ekev, which when employed as a noun means 'heel'; i.e., a part of the foot used in walking. This is to teach us that whenever a person takes a step, literally or figuratively, he must first reflect whether it is in accordance with the will of God, and if he should find that it is not, he must desist from it. The scriptural verse should be understood as follows: Vehaya ekev, And it shall be that with every step you hearken to learn whether it is the will of God that you should take that step."

At birth, Jacob was given the name Ya'akov. If he had not grasped on to Esau's heel, he might not have been born alive. He received the name Yisrael after he had wrestled with an angel of God. He would not have become Yisrael without the angel's blessing. Our portion says a person will not receive a reward unless he or she grasps on to God's laws. So it is with us. We need to grasp on to the heels of

others and of God if we are to step forward with our own souls.

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### **A Spiritual Meal of Blessing** *Lewis Kamrass*

*Parashat Ekev* contains the foundation for *Birkat Hamazon*, the Grace after Meals. In Deuteronomy 8:7-9, we read of the oft-repeated promise made to the Israelites that they will enjoy abundance and affluence. And in the next verse we are instructed: "When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to *Adonai* your God for the good land that God has given you." (Deuteronomy 8:10) In Moses' powerful admonitions to remember our history, the Torah voices the concern that we will forget our past and thereby lose our moorings. In a good land we may enjoy the blessing of prosperity and may forget the Source of our blessing. Projecting into the future, the Torah warns that affluence can be both a blessing and a curse--a message that is still applicable today.

Nachmanides taught us that our tradition developed an antidote to the natural arrogance that may arise from living in abundance, namely, *Birkat Hamazon*. This blessing of sustenance was viewed as a daily shield that helped guard us against forgetting the past, self-satisfaction, and haughtiness. Since talmudic times, the Grace after Meals was comprised of four blessings that thank God for Creation; express gratitude for the Land of Israel, redemption, the Covenant, and the Torah; request God's mercy and the restoration of Israel; and ask for the fulfillment of specific desires while expressing gratitude for God's goodness. (See *Talmud B'rachot* 48b.) *Birkat Hamazon* is to be recited at the table at which one ate any meal during which as little as a morsel of bread was eaten. (See Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah, B'rachot* 4:1.) Accessibility to the text was primary since it was determined that the blessing could be recited in any language (*Mishnah Sotah* 7:1). The *Motzi* before breaking bread was later added as an opening prayer to the meal that would conclude with *Birkat Hamazon*.

Since we live in "a good land," the Torah seems to be speaking directly to each of us. So does the practice of *Birkat Hamazon*. First, it teaches us that offering daily thanks helps us remember our personal relationship with the Creator. *Birkat Hamazon* invites us to take the mundane act of feeding our bodies out of the mere physical realm and to transform it into a spiritual rite. Second, it cautions us that it is very easy to believe that we are solely responsible for our success. It reminds us that we rely on others who grow,

harvest, process, deliver, purchase, or prepare the food we eat. Thus, by recognizing our interdependence, we appreciate the miracle of what we have enjoyed. Third, when we feel gratitude for anything, our enjoyment of that gift is heightened and deepened. Gratitude yields a greater ability to take pleasure in the "simple things" of life. The rabbis taught that "it is forbidden to enjoy the fruits of this world without pronouncing a blessing." (*Talmud B'rachot* 35a) Fourth, this continual thanksgiving turns us away from ourselves and toward the world around us. It reminds us of all those who are hungry. Because of this reminder, a ritual blessing can become a call to action in our souls to repair the brokenness of the world.

A good meal is not hard to find. But a sense of spiritual fulfillment comes only when we renew our personal relationship with the Creator, elevate a physical act to a higher spiritual realm, transform a sense of gratitude into genuine joy for our good fortune, and work as partners with God to bring the goodness we enjoy to those who are in need. *Birkat Hamazon* is the ritual call to those higher purposes, which turns any meal into a spiritual moment of joy and gratitude.

Suggestions for your own practice of *Birkat Hamazon*

1. Learn the *Birkat Hamazon* in Hebrew or in English, to be read or sung. *Birkon L'Shabbat: Blessings for the Table*, published by the CCAR Press, is a useful guide.
2. Learn by doing. Start with the recitation of *Birkat Hamazon* on Shabbat each week.
3. Consider a personal insertion: For what do you wish to give thanks? Create a different personal blessing for each day of the week. Invite family members or friends to share their statements of gratitude each time you recite *Birkat Hamazon* together.

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### **Directions upon Arrival** *Eileen S. Kollins*

In *Parashat Ekev*, Moses continues his instructions to the Israelites as they approach the end of their journey through the wilderness. There are certain issues that Moses feels must be reinforced. Since the people are enjoying God's innate kindness and caring, their lives must reflect the power and goodness of God.

*Parashat Ekev* reminds us that the Israelites' long journey through the desert has not been easy. They lost faith in both God and their leader on several occasions. Many times they complained and were dishonest. Some of them built and

worshiped an idol. Examples of their stubbornness and self-centeredness are frequent and well documented. However, God has never ceased to provide for them. They have made their way through the desert with all the food and water they needed. Their clothes did not wear out: Indeed, according to the rabbis, as the children grew, so did their clothes.

What will the Israelites' responsibilities be now that freedom is imminent? First and foremost, they must recognize that they are not being rewarded on their own merit. They have been fortunate to be considered by God to be an *Am S'gulah*, a "Treasured People." Just as the Children of Israel made a covenant with God to follow God's commandments and teach them to their children, so God will honor that covenant with them.

According to Moses, many wonderful things will come to the Israelites in the Promised Land: God's protection, fertility for the soil and the people, good health, and victory over their enemies. However, it is incumbent upon them "to revere *Adonai* your God, to walk only in God's paths, to love God, and to serve *Adonai* with all your heart and soul." (Deuteronomy 10:12) Moses continues to remind the people that their gifts are from God and are due to the goodness of the Creator, not their own actions.

What can we derive from *Parashat Ekev* for our own lives? Each of us has been given many gifts. Most of us enjoy relative peace and comfort, the warmth of family and friends, and a secure life. While we may have worked hard to achieve and maintain this lifestyle, ultimately we should give our thanks and appreciation to God for all that we enjoy. It is also imperative for us to remember that we must share our bounty with those less fortunate than we are.

Just as those who stood at Mount Sinai promised to teach their descendants the commandments by which to conduct their lives, we, too, must continue to do the same with future generations. It is up to us to teach those around us by the example of our lives. We must continue to honor and emulate God with acts of *tzedakah* and loving-kindness, as well as with prayer and study.

### Questions for Discussion

1. How you can be an example to others of a person who follows the commandments at home, in the synagogue, at work, and at school?
2. Describe some *mitzvot* that you do naturally and frequently and why they are important to you.
3. When you do an act that emulates God, are you always aware of the fact that you have performed that act

consciously? Would it be just as significant a *mitzvah* if you had done it unconsciously?

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