

A Drashah for Parashat Eikev
August 16, 2014
Susan Maxwell
Temple Aliyah, Needham

Shabbat Shalom.

Last week's parsha, Va-Etchanan, and today's parsha, Eikev, are linked together. They are central parts of the book of Deuteronomy, Devarim, in which Moses speaks to the people before his death. Moses lists the laws and rules as he has received them from God, repeats the ten commandments and generally gives us what will become the beliefs and guiding principles of Judaism that we repeat daily, year after year.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks of the U.K., writes,

“If someone who knew nothing about Judaism and the Jewish people were to ask you for a single book that would explain them both – who Jews are and why they do what they do – the best answer would be Devarim. No other book so encapsulates and dramatises all the key elements of Judaism as a faith and way of life.” (From “The Leader as Teacher, Devarim, 2 August, 2014.)

I am a big fan of Moses'. Moses inspires me not just with his wisdom, determination and courage but also – and perhaps ever more so -- because he is so human and because I identify with him as a parent.

Each year I am touched by the beginning paragraph of last week's parsha.

I pleaded with the Lord at that time, saying, “O Lord God, You who let your servant see the first works of Your greatness and Your mighty hand, You whose powerful deeds no god in heaven or on earth can equal! Let me, I pray, cross over and see the good land on the other side of the Jordan, that good hill country, and the Levanon.” But the Lord was wrathful with me on your account and would not listen to me. (Va-ethannan 3:23, Etz Hayim, p.1005)

All parents realize that there will be a future that we will not be a part of. For Moses, this realization is quite immediate and hence, his heartbreaking words. We feel Moses' anguish because he knows he will not be around to see the completion of his works.



I find two things about the way Moses handles himself to be touching and very human. First, I like the honest, clear way that Moses recounts to the people his disappointment and his failure to convince God to change his mind. Second, I admire the way that Moses immediately afterwards forges ahead courageously, listing the laws and rules that we will follow for thousands of years. This seems very parent-like to me. Many of us have come home after a frustrating interaction with our bosses, complained about it for a while and then moved on to making dinner, helping with homework and planning for the next day. That's what parents do.

In today's parsha Moses is using the time that he has left to make sure that the people know what is most important. He wants to ensure that the people remember all that they have experienced and learned during their forty years in the desert. **Love, therefore, the Lord your God, and always keep His charge, His laws, His rules, and His commandments. Take thought this day that it was not your children, who neither experienced nor witnessed the lesson of the Lord you God... But that it was you who saw with your own eyes all the marvelous deeds that the Lord performed. Keep, therefore, all the Instruction 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.... (Eikev, 11:2; Etz Hayim p.1050)**

This sounds to me like the words of a parent of young adults, who are about to go off to live their own lives. "...it was you who saw with your own eyes..." to me means, "Your experiences have shown you the difference between right and wrong. Remember how to behave when you go out into the world."

Of course, there is another side to Moses – and to parents. In both last week's and this week's parsha, in addition to enumerating the laws, Moses also can't seem to stop himself from reminding the people of the ways in which they have transgressed in previous years. Moses' parent-like fervor even makes him repeat things in a kind of annoying way. Moses reminds the people four times of how he interceded with God on their behalf, in spite of their acts of defiance. He even states that the people are the reason he will not be permitted to enter the Promised Land, which seems like a cognitive distortion to me. I thought it was because he hit the rock with the stick instead of having faith that God would provide water! Continuing this analogy of Moses as the parent and the people as his children, can't you just imagine the people rolling their eyes when he says that one?

But this is what we parents do sometimes. We repeat ourselves and sometimes we really rub it in. Moses can't stop himself from going over the rules and laws in the same way that I can't help myself from telling my young adult daughters things that I know they know. Do I really think that they weren't listening the first twelve thousand times I told them these things? And does Moses really think that the people somehow missed how angry he was when he came down from the mountain and discovered them with the golden calf?

Rabbi Maurice Harris, in his very interesting book, Moses, A Stranger Among Us, writes the following, in reference to Moses' heartbreak about not being able to enter the promised land:

“Maybe this whole passage isn't really about what Moses deserved or didn't deserve. Maybe what the Torah is describing here is just one of those hard-edged boundaries of life. Maybe the entire story of Moses' life and death, with its surprising opportunities for greatness and its terrible disappointments, is meant to teach us about one of the ultimate truths about the human condition. We get some opportunities to do meaningful and remarkable things in our lives (not necessarily the things we expect), and then there are some things we want so very badly that we just never get to do. Maybe what we can learn from Moses' life is that even someone who gets to do the most extraordinary things....*even* such a person experiences the hard-edged boundaries of life and death like the rest of us.”

(Moses, A Stranger Among Us, p.98)

Perhaps today's parsha can inspire us to be like Moses in all his best ways. Let's express our feelings with honesty and clarity, then accept reality as it is and forge ahead to do the work we were placed on earth to do.

Shabbat Shalom.