

There is so much rich juicy material in this week's parashah that I was hard pressed to figure out what to focus on this evening, especially as this might be the last time I share reflections on the parashah with you for a few months.

But as I was perusing the parashah, Eikev, and various commentaries, I was reminded that there is a paragraph in this week's portion that is actually in our prayer book, that our eyes have probably skimmed many times, though we don't ever say it out loud, and that there might be some wisdom in taking a deeper look at it this week.

That is the six verses of Deuteronomy Chapter 11:13-18, also known traditionally as the second paragraph of the Shema. Every week we recite Shema and v'ahavta together, and then go silent for a few minutes, with the option to read your choice of Biblical selections. The first option, beginning on page 66, is a compilation of two passages from later in Deuteronomy, chosen by the editors of the Reconstructionist prayer book, as a softer alternative to the traditional second paragraph of *Shema*, which you can find beginning on page 68. This is the paragraph that has been silently recited as the traditional second paragraph for thousands of years, and this is from this week's parashah, Eikev.

I want to take a few moments and be a little more interactive than my drashot usually are. Can I have a volunteer to read out loud the translation of this section, on page 68 in your siddur?

(reads)

Thank you! Okay, does anyone have a hypothesis on why the Reconstructionist editors of this siddur shied away from this paragraph, offered an alternative as the first option?

(take comments - if no one offers, explain supernatural theology of reward and punishment)

I have to confess though - I love this paragraph. I recite it fervently.

There is an important feature of this paragraph that is lost in translation. You know the *v'ahavta* paragraph which we recite goes, "*v'ahvata et Hashem elokecha, b'chol levavecha, etc.*" You shall love Hashem your God with all your heart, with all your soul, etc.

This paragraph begins *v'haya im shimoah tish'me'u asher ani mitzaveh et'chem l'ahava et adonai eloheichem b'chol l'vav'chem, etc.*" And if you truly listen to my mitzvot that I command you, loving God and serving God with all your heart, all your soul . . . sounds repetitive, but it's less repetitive in the Hebrew. Because in the Hebrew, the *v'ahavta* paragraph is entirely directed in the imperative singular: *V'ahavTA*: YOU as an individual shall love your God.

Whereas this paragraph, is all in the plural . . . that I command *you collectively* to love *your collective* God. I think that makes a big difference.

In a commentary on Masechet Brachot, page 14b, medieval sage Rashi offers this reflection: The Shema and *v'ahavta* paragraph are for us to take on the yoke of heaven, in other words, loving the Divine. The *V'hayah* paragraph, the one we are dealing with this week is for *Kabbalat ol mitzvot* - accepting the yoke of mitzvot, of obligation.

Love of God, in other words, is an attitude that an individual can cultivate in solitude. Obligations, in contrast, only are effective in the context of a collective.

And so, as much as the language of reward and punishment might seem harsh - or just frankly inaccurate, it makes a great deal more sense when we read it with the understanding that it is not speaking to you an individual. There is no promise that if *you individually* behave well, the rain will fall in its season, the ground will be abundant, and that you and your children will be safe. Neither is there the threat that if *you individually* stray, you will be punished. What we see instead is the promise that as society living in a balance of humility, serving the Divine, will prosper as a collective, whereas a society that goes astray will fail. Not only is that a little less harsh, perhaps, but the evidence, long-term bears it out.

The comment by Mordechai Liebling below the line on page 68 ties this paragraph to our collective, global ecological situation. The comment by Arthur Green on page 69 relates it to the dangers of a culture of entitlement, and how a culture focused on each individual's entitlement to what they have can lead to ingratitude, injustice and a never ending thirst for more - all consequences that we see playing out today in our own consumer culture, that has encouraged us to throw off any sense of a yoke of obligation to each other or to a larger power.

A culture of obligation and humility, however, is a much healthier culture. Earlier in this parashah, in Chapter 8, verse 17, we are warned that when we have eaten and are satisfied - that is to say, when we are secure in the basic sense, we need to guard against the mistaken belief that "My own power and the might of my hand have won this wealth for me." We must remember that we are all interdependent, that the good we have comes from a web of relationships.

When we remember this, we are more likely to be generous with others, to welcome the stranger, to care even for those who do not give us any direct

benefit - because we remember that we have received unearned gifts, and the only adequate way to respond is to pay it forward.

This is what I want for this community, when I am on maternity leave and beyond: That we all remember that we are bound not only by love, but by mutual obligation. That even when we don't necessarily feel like showing up for each other, that we do so anyways, because as this week's parashah and the second paragraph of Shema remind us, it is that sense of obligation that makes any group or society healthy and sustainable.

So even as I am daunted about departing from you all for a little while, I look forward to hearing about the ways that this community steps up as a collective in my absence, to continue cultivating that network of mutual love and obligation. And as the language of v'ahavta and of this week's parashah reminds us: the effects will absolutely be collective, but the loving contributions of each individual always matter greatly.

Shabbat shalom.