



Sermon Tidbits

AUGUST 22, 2016

Parashat Eikev

The Seemingly “Small” Mitzvah

Because you listen to these ordinances... (Deuteronomy 7:12)

עקב תשמעון (דברים ז:יב)

As of this Shabbat, seventy-two days remain until Election Day in November. While each of us recognizes the critical stakes in the presidential election, we often forget that other elected officials are running for their seats as well; every seat in the House of Representatives is up for grabs, as well as one-third of the Senate. Now, as campaigns enter crunch time, candidates need all of the help that they can get—whether that means making phone calls, sending out emails or canvassing voters. We might think that these are only small things, but Moses teaches us that sometimes small things can make all the difference.

In Parashat Eikev Moses continues his final address to the nation telling them that, “It shall come to pass, because you listen to these ordinances and keep, and do them, that the Lord your God shall keep with you the covenant and the mercy which He swore to your fathers...” (7:12) Commentators wondered what ordinances and commandments does Moses refer to that will guarantee that the people will receive a great blessing? Rashi, (on verse 12) quoting the Midrash, makes a play on the word *eikev*—meaning “because”—which can also refer to the “heel” on a person’s foot. Rashi writes that Moses refers to “the ‘light’ commandments that a person tramples with his heel.” Rashi implies that we stress the importance of specific mitzvot, while there are others that we metaphorically “trample” on with our heels. Rashi teaches us that we will merit the blessings listed by Moses when we emphasize the “light”—less important commandments—together with the more “heavy” mitzvot.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk (see Parparaot L’Torah vol. 5 p. 63) wondered what specific commandment Rashi refers to here. What commandment do we “trample with our heels?” He suggests that the one commandment we can fulfill with our feet is the commandment to settle in the Land of Israel, for literally to walk the land is considered a great mitzvah. “Yet, many treat this as a light commandment that we can ignore.” He suggests that Moses emphasizes the importance of fulfilling the commandment of settling the Land in order to receive the blessings promised in the Torah.

Since the establishment of the Jewish state, many have chosen to settle in the Land of Israel literally. But for the great many of us who remain in the diaspora, we are not absolved of the commandment to keep Israel safe. Here in the United States, we can work to ensure that Israel remains a priority to our members of Congress. With our nation's attention consumed by the upcoming elections, it is important to remember why our work, in a bipartisan manner, is so important. Our community needs elected officials from both parties to support a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. When we offer our time, resources and energy to a local candidate who we enthusiastically support, all while passionately communicating the importance of supporting the U.S. – Israel relationship, that fervor makes a critical impact.

In the coming weeks, Labor Day will come and go, our children will go back to school, and our local elections will swing into high gear. This is the time to both get involved in the local electoral process, and express our support for Israel at the same time. Our willingness to do the “small things” for our candidate of choice while communicating the importance of a strong U.S. – Israel relationship is critical now, but will show its impact long into the future. ■

Israel's Blessings

You shall be blessed above all peoples (Deuteronomy 7:14)

ברוך תהיה מכל העמים (דברים ז:יד)

Translated literally, this verse presents a difficult challenge: Did Moses truly imagine that the tiny nation of Israel would one day enjoy blessings greater than all of the other nations? In an effort to answer this question, commentators offered different interpretations to this verse based on alternative meanings of the word *mikol*.

“Said Rabbi Shimon bar Chalafta: ‘When the queen is praised by her relatives and neighbors, she has no [particular] honor. When is there honor? When she is praised by the king’s other wives.’ This is the meaning of the verse, ‘You shall be blessed *from* all the other nations’—like Pharaoh blessed Joseph; Balaam [praised] Jacob; Laban praised Rebecca, and Nebuchadnezzar praised Daniel.” (Yalkut Shimoni Shir HaShirim) In this explanation of the Midrash, Rabbi bar Chalafta is arguing that the greatest symbol of blessing is when other nations that compete with Israel offer her praise.

Today, we are witnessing the fulfillment of the Midrashic promise as countries around the world seek out Israel’s expertise and knowledge in the areas of technology and security. Speaking to reporters late last month, Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu [explained Israel’s strategy](#) of seeking alliances around the world. “‘What we see in the world is that the strong survive; the weak do not survive...and the strong build alliances.’ Israel was building alliances based on the fact that it is an ‘intelligence superpower,’ as well as a country with technology that others seek. Netanyahu said that with the entire world facing the problem of terrorism, intelligence was essential, and Israel provides intelligence.” Israel has also experienced the blessing of warming relations with its neighbors. Recently, a senior Israeli delegation met with Jordanian Prime Minister Hani Al-Muki to discuss energy, water and employment, the Israeli website [Globes reported](#). Israel also works very closely with Egypt on security matters—fighting the forces of ISIS in the Sinai desert. In a significant development, [Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry](#) visited Jerusalem last month. These and many other diplomatic engagements demonstrate clearly that over recent years, Israel has enjoyed the blessings of its neighbors and rivals, who seek Israel’s assistance, friendship and partnership.

Another explanation of Moses’ verse is that Israel will enjoy blessings *in contrast* to other nations. While Israel has impressively made great diplomatic progress in recent years, much of its success has come at a time of great need for Israel’s neighbors. Israel finds herself situated in the most dangerous neighborhood in the world, placed in the middle of countries that face an increasingly unstable environment. Netziv alludes to this fact in his commentary Ha’amek Davar. (on verse 14) He explains that the blessings promised by Moses would be in contrast to other nations that did not need to struggle for security and survival. When Moses promised that that we will be “blessed among the peoples,” Netziv writes that he refers to those nations, “that are engaged in the settlement of their country with tranquility. And you [who] are engaged in the toil of war, nonetheless you will enjoy greater blessing than them.”

Netziv’s comments directly reflect the complicated reality of Israel’s dangerous neighborhood. Israel is known around the world as the “Start-Up Nation” precisely because the adversity it faces has forced the tiny country to innovate and create the technologies necessary to address pressing problems. From drip-irrigation to the Iron Dome, adversity necessitates a culture of invention and innovation now famous around the world. Last month, former Israeli President Shimon Peres [announced the establishment of the Israeli Innovation Center](#) which will house a museum that will highlight the Jewish state as the “Start-Up Nation,” and will trace the history of Israeli innovation, “demonstrating that many key inventions—especially in the fields of military and agricultural technology—which were born out of a need to address the difficult conditions facing the young country.” The museum represents the great blessings Netziv described when he wrote his commentary over a century ago. While other nations enjoyed peace and tranquility, the challenges that Israel faces has and will force it to innovate, grow and thrive, creating great blessings for the Jewish people.

This week while we read Moses imagine a nation “blessed above all peoples,” let us not debate the many interpretations of his words, but rather appreciate the blessings. Today, the modern state of Israel is a true miracle and a light unto the nations. As the only liberal democracy in the Middle East and a leader in innovation, Israel proves to be a blessed country. ■