

929 Deuteronomy Chapter 9

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929, the number of chapters in Tanakh, is the name of a project dedicated to creating a global Jewish conversation around the 929 chapters of the Hebrew Bible. Below is a contribution about this week's parashah. Visit 929.org.il to learn more.

Though the expression appears a few times in Tanakh, it is in this chapter that "stiff-necked people" becomes Moshe's central chiding term to describe the people of Israel.

A metaphor for stubbornness, *stiff-neckedness* is an allusion to an ox used for plowing or harrowing, one which does not allow itself to be led. Like the analogy of the "yoke of heaven," *stiff-necked* is derived from the biblical ideal of a master-servant relationship between God and the Israelites, where the Israelites' stubbornness is referring to their unwillingness to follow God's commandments.

Yet, the yoke of heaven is not just any yoke—and thus, the ox, though is a familiar agricultural trope for the biblical Jew, is not a true depiction of our relationship with God. In fact, God broke the yoke that Israelites carried like animals under Pharaoh: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out from the Land of Egypt to be their slaves no more, who broke the bars of your yoke and made you walk upright" (Lev. 26:13). The yoke of heaven is one under which a Jew can stand straight, and perhaps ironically, independently.

Being upright and stiff-necked, however, does not allow us to be in relationship with God. Sforno comments (on Deut. 9:6) that stiff-neckedness results in one's inability to see other opinions, or one's own wrong: one cannot, will not, move her head. Unlike an ox, which is required to faithfully plow away, unable to turn its head under the yoke, rarely seeing its master, we need to be able to turn our heads, and thus ourselves, toward God. This turning—teshuva—requires vulnerability and admission of weakness.

In the next chapter, parallel to relaxing our stiff necks, we are required to circumcise our hearts. The rawness of the heart, together with the softness of the neck, guides us in carrying the yoke while standing upright.

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A Land That's Too Good?

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I received a call one evening this summer from the doctor at Ramah Palmer. My son had tripped, and she wanted permission to bring him off camp the next day to have his swollen wrist x-rayed. Of course! But by the next morning I had convinced myself that I should pick him up from camp and bring him to our local orthopedist. I even convinced my husband that this would be best for insurance, since our orthopedist is in our insurance network. Unfortunately for me, the camp's local hospital also turned out to be in our network. Truthfully, I wanted him to come home because I wanted to see him with my own eyes to make sure he was OK. My son is eleven, and he was hurt badly enough that he needed x-rays.

My son, however, wasn't having it. He made clear that he wasn't coming home, even if we promised we would bring him back to camp right after the appointment. And he was right. The camp brought him for x-rays, and the bone wasn't broken. Within a couple of days, we saw pictures of him playing hockey without even a splint. I was a little hurt at first that he didn't need me, but then my hurt turned to pride: he didn't need me.

This week's Torah portion, Eikev, is part of Moses's final speech to the Israelites before they will pass into the Land of Israel. In it, God (via Moses) expresses God's desire to provide an idyllic existence for God's children, the "Children of Israel," in the Land of Israel. Like most parents, God not only feels an obligation to feed and protect God's children, but God wants to facilitate their happiness as well.

Thus, God promises to bring them into a land of unparalleled vigor: "For God is bringing you to a good land, a land of streams and springs and fountains coming forth from valley and hill. A land of wheat, barley, vine, fig, and pomegranate, a land of olive oil and honey. A land where you shall eat bread

without poverty, where you will lack nothing, whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you will mine copper" (Deut. 8:7-9). A rabbinic midrash suggests that every other land in the world is lacking in some way, except for Israel (*Sifrei Devarim* 37:6). The Israelites won't need to worry about irrigation, which is hard work and might cause them to lose sleep (Rashi on Deut 11:10). Instead, God will provide because "[The Land of Israel] is a land that God looks after; God's eyes are upon it from the beginning to the end of the year" (Deut 11:12).

According to Midrash, the current inhabitants of the Land of Israel have been working to prepare it for the Israelites' arrival: "Thus you find that the whole 40 years that the Israelites were in the wilderness, the (current) inhabitants of the Land of Israel were building houses and digging holes, pits, and caves, planting fields, vineyards and all types of fruit trees in order that when our fathers arrived in the Land of Israel they would find it full of blessing" (*Sifrei Devarim* 38:10). The Israelites have no need to fear the current inhabitants, who are more numerous than they are; God will "clear them away" to make way for the Israelites (Deut 7:19-24).

As I read this passage, I was struck by the unusual Hebrew verb, *nashal* (נָשַׁל), "to clear away," which occurs several times in our portion and last week's portion to describe God's destruction of the current inhabitants in the Land of Israel. The word is rare enough that Rashi feels the need to define it using synonyms that mean to remove forcefully. Perhaps, if God were a modern parent, it would be fair to accuse God of acting like a "snowplow parent" in this moment. A snowplow parent seeks to clear away any obstacle in his child's path in a misguided attempt to assure her future success.

Was it really necessary that God bring the Israelites to not only a good land, but the very best land? Wouldn't a less than perfect home have sufficed? Why does God promise to "clear away" the other peoples whom the Israelites fear instead of urging the Israelites to confront their own challenges? Even putting aside the injustice of using another people to unwittingly build their land, aren't the Israelites perfectly capable of building houses and planting fields, as well as devising a solution for irrigation? (Indeed, the Israelites do irrigate their fields by the time of the Mishnah.)

In the introduction to her book, *How to Raise an Adult*, Julie Lythcott-Haims explains the modern snowplow parenting phenomenon and why it is

problematic: "We treat our kids like rare and precious botanical specimens and provide a deliberate, measured amount of care and feeding while running interference on all that might toughen and weather them. But humans need some degree of weathering in order to survive the larger challenges life will throw our way. Without experiencing the rougher spots of life, our kids become exquisite, like orchids, yet are incapable, sometimes terribly incapable, of thriving in the real world on their own" (7).

Those parents caught paying off universities in the recent sting "Operation Varsity Blues" were an extreme example of this larger trend. Modern articles abound cautioning against such parenting. Children whose parents overly intervene in their childhood often become less resilient adults. Sometimes they refuse to become adults at all. Small setbacks can seem catastrophic because they aren't accustomed to navigating frustration or criticism on their own. They have trouble trusting their own judgment. Lythcott-Haims sums up the concern: "Maybe [they] did so much for their kids that their kids have been robbed of a chance to develop a belief in their own selves" (*ibid.*).

Like many parents, God's desire to give the Israelites the easiest, most wonderful life is in tension with God's concern that such a life might yield undesirable results. God warns that the Israelites could become haughty and falsely believe that they are solely responsible for their success, forgetting to be grateful to God. The text specifies that God tried to prevent this haughtiness by subjecting the Israelites to earlier hardships, including slavery and wandering in the desert: "You should know in your heart that God disciplines you like a parent disciplines a child" (Deut. 8:5).

Inflicting hundreds of years of slavery and 40 years of intense deprivation for disciplinary purposes probably disqualifies God from being a snowplow parent. And the sheer nature of God's divinity makes human comparisons fraught. But rather than snowplow parents, most parents I know, even God apparently, have their snowplow moments. Usually, we are mindful that for our children (and others who rely on us) to thrive as adults they need space to make mistakes, they need to feel the thrill of independence, they need to know that they can endure scrapes and bruises and other challenges without their parents. But sometimes we forget and attempt to shield them from all struggle. At those times- like when the camp doctor calls—if we are lucky, our children will remind us.