

A Taste of Torah

A commentary written by Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, director of Israel Programs, JTS.

Gratitude for the Land

Parashat Eikev is centered on the Land of Israel. As the Israelites stand on the verge of entering the Land, they are promised prosperity in return for their loyalty to God's commandments. Torah, however, anticipates the downside of the success, affluence, and prosperity that await the young nation. Deuteronomy 8:11–14 declares, "Take care lest you forget the Lord your God and fail to keep His commandments . . . which I enjoin upon you today. When you have eaten your fill and build fine houses to live in . . . beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Lord your God." Affluence breeds the dangerous perception of self-sufficiency. Indeed, the Israelite relationship with God is paramount. This message is underscored in the moving description offered of the Land of Israel in Deuteronomy 11:10: "For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come." Why does Torah seek to juxtapose Egypt and Israel? What may we learn about ourselves and about the Land of Israel?

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch elaborates,

Egypt's fertility is independent of the rain. It is watered by the Nile irrigation canals cut right through the country, made and worked by human efforts . . . But Palestine is a land dependent for its supply of water on the mountain springs fed by the rainfall. Moreover, the country was built not only in the valleys or plains but also on the mountains and hilly districts where means for artificial watering are impossible. So ultimately fertility is entirely dependent on rainfall. (*Commentary on Numbers*, 182)

Clearly, according to Torah as well as Hirsch's commentary, "earthly Jerusalem" (*Yerushalayim shel matalah*) is intimately connected to and dependent on Jerusalem of the heavens (*Yerushalayim shel ma'alah*). Water, especially in Israel, cannot be taken for granted. Not only is it a literal sign of divine favor and nourishment, it is also a figurative symbol of the vital relationship between God and the People. Even when the People are blessed by abundance, they must not lose sight of the true source of their blessing: the partnership between God and humans. Torah anticipates and cautions that there will come a prosperous day when the Israelites will say, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.' Remember that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth" (Deut. 8:17–18). The Land of Israel teaches us the vital lesson of humility. Only by diminishing our egos may we truly enrich ourselves, our communities, and our connection to God.

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Torah from JTS

Eikev 5773

Parashah Commentary

This week's commentary was written by Rabbi Abigail Treu, national director of Torah Fund and rabbinic fellow, JTS.

Consolation and Repair

Last December at my home, we set our living room on fire with our Hanukkah candles. The story makes for a perfect lesson in fire safety: Never leave candles unattended. Never place your *hanukkiyah* on a flammable tablecloth. Check smoke alarms regularly. Always keep a fire extinguisher on hand. If you are blessed to be able to afford it, buy home insurance.

Our living room has been sitting in a state of half-repair ever since. Between the hassle of the insurance claim and the red tape involved with the contractor—to say nothing of the usual business of everyday life—the project has sat in the “important but not urgent” column of our to-do list. We are grateful no one was hurt, grateful that more important things have been accomplished, and also grateful that finally the painting and repairs are set to begin next week.

I am struck by the timing of the repairs. Here we find ourselves two weeks into the seven weeks marked ever so gently by their haftarot, the *shiv'ah d'nehemata* (seven haftarot of comfort or consolation)—seven weeks in which the haftarot have nothing to do with the parashiyot, and everything to do with where we are in the calendar year: heading from Tish'ah Be'Av into the season of *teshuva*, and ultimately into a new year.

Ever since reading *This Is Real and You Are Completely*

Unprepared, by Rabbi Alan Lew (z”l), I have come to see these seven weeks differently; that magic number invites us to notice them. The season is framed by two 25-hour fast days, the only two complete fast days of the Jewish calendar. It opens with the crumbling of walls and ends with gates closing—a job complete.

Since Tish’ah Be’Av, we have listened along with B’nai Israel as Moses gives us his final words: a retelling of the stories we know. Deuteronomy—as its traditional appellation, Mishneh Torah, implies—is a repetition; very little of its material is new. We look back before we move forward. Poised to begin again, on the threshold of the Promised Land, the Israelites stop to listen to and remember their past, the story of their lives up to that very moment. Poised to begin again, on the threshold of a new year, we too must stop to listen to and remember our past, to the stories of our lives lived up until now. There are seven weeks—five still to go—until we will stand and say, “*Hayom harat olam*” (today is the birthday of the world).

We began with Tish’ah Be’Av: destruction, mourning, the tearing down of walls. Apart from the *sinat hinam* (the senseless hatred that, according to the midrash, caused the Temple to be destroyed) or the dozens of calamities that all took place on that fated day, Tish’ah Be’Av is about the tearing down of very precious walls. It was so painful, we fast.

This is Rabbi Lew’s great lesson: that that fast, that these weeks, are not just part of a national historic commemoration. They are part of our most intimate spiritual journey. Our own *teshuva* begins with the tearing down of walls. Yes, it is sad, and we fast; but such is life. It is only by the tearing down of the walls that separate us one from another, ego from ego, that we can begin to reconcile, to restore intimacy, to do *teshuva*.

This week’s haftarah reminds us, “*Chomotayich negdi tamid*” (Your walls are always before Me) (Isa. 49:16). God knows the walls we put up around us. And this is a source of comfort, because God, who wants us to return with full hearts, knows that the walls must come down. And yet,

The walls of our great house are crumbling all the time, and not just in midsummer at Tisha B’Av, when we mourn

the destruction of the Temple. Every moment of our lives, the sacred house of our life—the constructs by which we live and to which we hold on so fiercely—nevertheless falls away. Every moment, we take in a breath and the world comes into being, and then we let out a breath and the world falls away. (Lew, *This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared*, 15)

Our walls are always up and always coming down. Here we have seven weeks to notice them and decide what repairs to make, and what to let crumble. Or as a favorite yoga teacher once put it: When you feel like your head is banging against the wall, look up—you just might notice that there’s a door just to your left.

Look up—or listen up. For in just over a week, beginning on Rosh Hodesh Elul, the shofar will sound—the shofar, whose blasts shook down the walls of Jericho. It calls us to wake up and notice the year gone by, and whom and what we have become. There have been crises. Fires have burned down our temples and our homes; we have tried and failed, loved and suffered. Of course the repairs should begin now: that is what we are supposed to be doing. Beginning to work on all those things that crumbled during the year, that we let drift in varying states of half-repair, that we’ve gotten used to living with as is. The urgency doesn’t come until Yom Kippur, until those mythic gates close at the end of our next fast. But there are many important things that need repair or cleaning up, and we need all seven weeks to do it. As we read these seven haftarat, we know that cleaning up the mess is hard, but it will all be okay. Or in the words of the prophet Isaiah, in his final line for us this week: “The Lord comforts Zion, God comforts all that is ruined. Her desert will blossom like Eden, her wilderness like that garden of the Lord. Joy and gladness will be found there. Songs of thanksgiving will fill the air” (51:3).

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