

Revelation lasts a moment, acceptance continues . . . Sinai is both an event that happened once and for all, and an event that happens all the time. What God does, happens both in time and in eternity. Seen from our vantage point, it happened once; seen from His vantage point, it happens all the time. About the arrival of the people at Sinai we read . . . “In the third month after the children of Israel were gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on this day they came into the wilderness of Sinai” (Exodus 19:1). Here was an expression that puzzled the ancient rabbis: on *this* day? It should have said, on *that* day. This can only mean that the day of giving the Torah can never become past; that day is this day, every day.* (*God in Search of Man. A Philosophy of Judaism* [New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1955], 213–15)

The command, or *mitzvah*, that is the heart of Judaism cannot function if we regard it as something from our people’s past. A command can only be a command if God’s commanding, and our accepting, take place today. This week’s parashah, like Deuteronomy as a whole and Rosenzweig and Heschel, comes to remind us, from one bookend to the next, that Judaism is alive only if we understand the Torah commanding us today, every day.

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* Heschel cites Midrash Tanhuma (Buber) Yitro 7, BT Berakhot 63b, and Rashi to Exod. 19:1, as well as Deut. 6:6, 11:13 and 26:16. Elsewhere Heschel notes that this teaching appears in the work of his great-great-grandfather and namesake, Avraham Yehoshua Heschel, the Hasidic sage known as the Apter Rebbe. See the elder Heschel’s classic, *Ohev Yisroel* (Zhitomir, 5623), to *Parashat Ki Tetzei*, 172a. (*Torah min Hashamayim B’aspaqlarya shel Hadorot*, vol. 3 [New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1990], 37, translated by Gordon Tucker in *Heavenly Torah as Refracted Through the Generations* [New York: Continuum, 2005], 672)

Eikev 5780

עקב תש"ף



A Moment That Is Always Present

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Parashat Eikev is surrounded by matching bookends. The verse that ends the previous parashah, Va’et-hannan, and the verse that begins the subsequent parashah, Re’eh, both contain the word, *hayyom*, or “today”:

וְשִׁמְרַת אֶת־הַמִּצְוָה וְאֶת־הַחֻקִּים וְאֶת־הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְךָ הַיּוֹם לַעֲשׂוֹתָם:

You should carefully carry out the commandment, the laws, and the statutes, that I command you **today**.

(Parashat Va’et-hannan: Deut. 7:11)

רְאֵה אָנֹכִי נֹתֵן לְפָנֶיךָ הַיּוֹם בְּרָכָה וּקְלָלָה:

Look: **today** I set before you a blessing and a curse.

(Parashat Re’eh: Deut. 11:26)

In between those bookends the word *hayyom*, meaning “today,” appears no fewer than twelve times. In this respect, Parashat Eikev is typical of the book in which it appears, because the word *hayyom* is a leitmotiv in Deuteronomy, occurring seventy-four times. It serves as what the great Jewish theologians and biblical commentators Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig call a “guiding word”: its variations in Deuteronomy provide a key that unlocks a central theme of the book.

Hayyom simply means “today,” but it is not always clear which “today” Deuteronomy intends. The book of Deuteronomy consists largely of several speeches Moses delivered shortly before his death. Since Moses is the speaker, “today” must mean the day Moses delivered the speech, at the end of the Israelites’ forty-year journey to the Promised Land. In some verses, this is explicitly the case. In our parashah (9:1 and 9:3), when Moses refers to the fact that the Israelites are soon to cross over the River Jordan to enter the land of Canaan “today” means the day on which Moses is speaking. But in other verses, Moses, who after all is speaking as a prophet, appears to

speak on behalf of God. This is the case in the many verses where we find the phrase **אשר אנכי מצוך היום**, “that which that I command you today.” God is the one who issues the commands, and so we might infer that *harryom* refers to the day God revealed the law on top of Mount Horeb, at the very *beginning* of the Israelites’ forty years in the desert. This is clearly the case when the word appears in last week’s parashah at Deuteronomy 5:24.

But in this week’s parashah, it’s clear that the speaker of this phrase is in fact Moses, because the surrounding verses refer to God in the third person; see 8:1, 11, and 19. In those verses “today” must refer to a day at the end of the forty years. However, it’s possible that in some cases both meanings make sense: God commanded the Israelites at Horeb soon after they left Egypt, and Moses conveys those commands to the Israelites a little while before they enter Canaan. The word *harryom* in the oft-repeated phrase “which I command you today” becomes charged with a double meaning referring to more than one moment in time.

We see this phenomenon toward the end of this week’s parashah. The phrase “which I command you today” occurs in 11:13, and in the two verses that follow God speaks in the first person: “I shall provide timely rain for you . . . I shall provide grass for your cattle.” This suggests that the speaker who commands the people “today” is God. Does that mean that God commands Israel on the day Moses delivers this speech? Or should we understand God’s commanding Israel “today” as referring to the event at Mount Horeb forty years earlier? Elsewhere in the same passage, it is clearly Moses who uses the word “today,” which must refer to the day he delivered his speech (11:8, 27, and 28). In a single passage, the shift between these two “todays” breaks down the specificity of the word’s reference. This repetition disconnects our guiding word from any particular day in the past, allowing Deuteronomy’s audiences through time to understand the word as referring not only to these two events in the past but, most importantly, to their own present, the day on which they read our parashah.

Ultimately, the “today” of which Deuteronomy speaks includes the “today” of the book’s audience—that is, the many “todays” of each person the text addresses. This is especially evident in 11:2–9 where Moses maintains that the members of the generation listening to his speech witnessed God’s miracles at the time of the exodus from Egypt—though in fact his audience is one generation removed from those events. Many of the Israelites in his audience were born during the forty years of wandering through the desert. Even the oldest among them were but children at the time of the exodus itself, since all the adults who left Egypt (other than Moses, Joshua, and Caleb) died during the forty years of wandering. But Deuteronomy implicitly claims that in each and every generation, people must see

themselves as if they had gone forth from Egypt, and so Deuteronomy can refer to the children’s generation as having been present at their parents’ liberation from slavery. Similarly, in every generation people must regard the lawgiving at Mount Horeb as something they themselves witnessed (as last week’s parashah intimated at 5:3).

Deuteronomy wants the audience’s acceptance of God’s commands to occur “today,” not in the past. Religious meaning seems reserved for a moment that knows neither past generations nor future ones, but only an eternal now. This is the reason our parashah, like the book of which it is part, uses the word “today” to refer to several different days: the “today” that matters is whatever day we happen to be reading Deuteronomy. As Jews, we leave Egypt—that is, we accept our freedom—every day, or at least we should. And as Jews, we receive God’s command—that is, we accept the responsibility that comes with freedom—every day, or at least we should. Only when we realize that Parashat Eikev addresses each of us directly this Shabbat do we understand Deuteronomy’s message: that we need to embrace the law as our own right now.

Deuteronomy is the first Jewish text that emphasizes “today,” but hardly the last. The need for divine command to be understood as coming to us in the present is a central theme for what is widely regarded as the greatest work of Jewish philosophy of the twentieth century, Franz Rosenzweig’s *The Star of Redemption*. There Rosenzweig writes,

The imperative of commandment makes no provision for the future; it can only conceive the immediacy of obedience . . . Thus the commandment is purely the present . . . All of revelation is subsumed under the great today. God commands “today,” and “today” it is incumbent to obey his voice. It is in the today that the love of the lover lives, in this imperative today of the commandment. (*The Star of Redemption*, trans. William W. Hallo [Boston: Beacon Press, 1972], 177)

Similarly, in his influential essay “The Builders,” Rosenzweig proclaims that in order for Jews to observe Jewish law authentically, God’s command “must regain that today-ness in which all great Jewish periods have sensed the guarantee for its eternity.” (*Zweistromland: Kleinere Schriften zu Glauben und Denken*, ed. Reinhold und Annemarie Mayer [Dordrech: Nijhoff, 1984], 707. Adapted from trans. by Nahum Glatzer)

Abraham Joshua Heschel, too, speaks of the need for commitment to happen in a moment that is always present; this is true of commitments humans have to other humans, and no less so for one’s acceptance of commitments to God: