

## Raising Children in a Land of Plenty



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The book of Hosea captures the problem of human nature in Parashat Eikev when God proclaims, “I did know you in the wilderness, in the land of great drought. When they were fed, they became full; they were filled and their heart was exalted; therefore they have forgotten me” (Hos. 13:5–6). There are endless historical and contemporary examples that mirror this cycle, such as the immigrant parent who achieves worldly success and becomes worried about the spiritual well-being of their children. Or, to take a scene from popular culture, after the beloved Rocky wins the heavyweight boxing title, he succumbs to the lure of fame, spoils his child, and loses his edge—the eye of the tiger. A close reading of chapter eight in this week’s parashah teaches us how our tradition responds to the perennial problem of raising children in a land of plenty.

The children of Israel are at the precipice of entering the Land of Israel, having depended upon God for all of their needs while wandering in the wilderness. Moses, who knows he will not enter the Land, attempts to warn the people about the danger of bounty and the weakness of their own natures. They will enter “a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey” (Deut. 8:7–8). Like God’s warning in Hosea, Moses admonishes: “When you have eaten your fill . . . beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget your God” (Deut. 8:12–14). In the midst of plenty, this warning from Moses hits on one of the greatest human flaws and ongoing biblical sins: human beings are quick to forget the Source of their blessings, proclaiming, “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me” (Deut. 8:17). Moses’s challenge to the Israelites reverberates today: How do we refrain from spoiling ourselves or our children in the midst of plenty?

In Deuteronomy 8, we can identify four main terms or *leitworts* that provide keys to unlocking responses to our problem:

1. זכור/שכח *Zakhor/Shakhah* (remember/forget)
2. ברכה *Berakhah* (blessing)
3. מצוה *Mitzvah* (commandment)
4. ענוי *Inui* (test or hardship)

For each of these terms, we can consider the contextual meaning (*peshat*) and an applied or contemporary meaning (*derash*) to answer how to raise children in the midst of plenty.

The terms *zakhor*, to remember, and its opposite, *shakhah*, to forget, appear in the following verses: “remember (*zakhor*) that it is the Lord your God who gives you the power to get wealth” (Deut. 8:18) and “beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget (*veshakhah*) the Lord your God who freed you from Egypt” (Deut. 8:14). In these two contexts, the *peshat* of *zakhor*, or its opposite, refers to God being the source of success. Shabbat reminds us to cease from creation and to remember that we are not the Creator.

In the words of Abraham Joshua Heschel, ceasing is a practice which requires us to “stop worshipping the idols of technical civilization,” and Shabbat is “a day of armistice in the economic struggle with our fellow men and forces of nature.” (Heschel, *The Sabbath*, p.3)

Next we move to *berakha*, or blessing, with the well-known verse from the Grace After Meals, “You will eat and be satisfied and bless” (Deut. 8:10). Here we express our gratitude to the Source of our bounty. Two lines later,

Moses warns that the people will “eat and be satisfied” without blessing (Deut. 8:12). Eating without a blessing carries the danger of forgetting the Source. Traditionally, blessing is an immediate acknowledgement of a gift received. What would this look like today? Some modern applications would be writing thank you notes, acknowledging a host, or expressing gratitude at the end of a class.

The third key term, *mitzvah* or commandment, is expressed in the first verse of chapter 8: “All the commandments (*mitzvot*) which I give to you this day, keep and do, that you may live and increase and possess the Land” (Deut. 8:1). Each time the term *mitzvah* is used in this chapter, it is accompanied by the word *shamor*, to keep or guard. First and foremost, following the commandments keeps you in relationship with God. When the Israelites fulfill their obligation, they receive life, offspring, and the Land. If the sin of this chapter is forgetting the source of your blessing and succumbing to hubris, we see that one of the functions of the *mitzvot* is to pull you out of your hubris and stretch you into a relationship with God or with others. Regularly practicing *mitzvot* like *tzedakah*, *talmud torah*, or honoring one’s parents enables you to counteract the arrogance and selfishness of seeing yourself as the source of blessing and highest being.

In this chapter the term *inui*, test or hardship, is connected to testing by hardship, whether by hunger or wandering in the wilderness (Deut. 8:2,3,16). Thinking about our essential question around the case of a child, *inui* asks what kind of discipline enables a child not to be spoiled. How do you create a home that is joyous, playful, generous, and welcoming, while also including discipline as a means for remembering, blessing, and *mitzvah*? Throughout the Israelites’ wandering through the desert, God has modeled discipline by creating a situation of total dependency, such as living on the daily manna, and then God brings the Israelites into a land of milk and honey. God quickly becomes infuriated when the people do not meet God’s expectations, highlighting the challenging nature of the divine plan.

God attempted to bring the people from total dependency to a land of overwhelming riches. In his speech to the children of Israel, Moses warns that such an abrupt transition is unlikely to be successful. Perhaps God could have disciplined the people not only in a place of deprivation, but also in a place of temptation. Or, brought them from the wilderness into a land of moderation and simplicity on the way to a land of plenty. With our own children, our challenge is to create homes and communities which are steeped in discipline, the practice of *mitzvot*, blessing, and memory; children who are disciplined, committed, responsible, and grateful, and who live in relationship to a larger Source.