Parshat HaShavua
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**PARASHAT EIKEV**

**by Rav Ezra Bick**

A.

Parashat Eikev occupies a clear and distinct position in relation to Devarim and Va-Etchanan. Parashat Devarim summarized the historical steps which explained how the Jews got to be camped on the plains on Moav at this time. Va-etchanan, in light of the fact that Moshe would not continue with the Jews into the Land of Israel, consisted mostly of repeated exhortations on the part of Moshe to keep the Torah, his legacy to the Jews, and to realize that it was the key to success in Eretz Yisrael. Eikev, if we concentrate on the overall framework, is devoted to explaining the results of keeping the Torah, as a covenant between God and His people.

If you shall listen to these statutes and observe and do them, then God shall keep for you the covenant and the mercy which He has promised your fathers (7,12).

The list of promises continues, both in general terms and specifically concerning aid in the conquest of the Land (13-16; 17-24).

Chapter 8 contains a discussion and explication of the desert experience, and its relation to the conditions that will obtain when they come to the Land of Israel. How does this fit in to the opening theme of the parasha?

The answer is more or less indicated in the opening of the chapter.

All the commandments which I command you this day shall you observe to do, IN ORDER THAT you may live and multiply, and come to inherit the land which God has promised to your fathers. And you shall remember the entire way which God lead you for forty years in the desert.... (8,1-2).

The following verses are meant as a warning, to prevent a situation where the very blessings engendered by observance of the covenant undermine the covenant itself. The end of the chapter makes this explicit.

Beware lest you forget HaShem your God.... Lest you eat and be satiated, and build goodly houses and settle them.

And your cattle and flocks multiply, and gold and silver multiply for you, and everything of yours be multiplied.

And your heart be lifted up, and you forget HaShem your God, who took you out of Egypt, the house of bondage....

And you say: My strength and power of my arm has made for me all this wealth. (8,11-17)

Moshe presents the desert experience as the antidote to the sinful pride likely to occur once they settle the land. Our task today is to understand specifically the meaning of the "midbar," what was God's purpose in maintaining the special conditions of the desert for forty years, as explained by Moshe in this parasha.

B.

Twice in the chapter Moshe refers to the general desert experience, and specifically to the manna, as embodying an eternal message for the Jewish people.

1.

And you shall remember the entire way which HaShem your God lead you, these forty years in the desert, IN ORDER ("lima'an") to afflict you ("anotcha") and test you ("nasotcha"), to know what is in your heart - will you observe His commandments or not. And He afflicted you and made you hungry, and fed you the manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, IN ORDER ("lima'an") to inform you, that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by all the utterances of the mouth of God. (8,2-3; read on until 8,5).

2.

And your heart be lifted up and you forget HaShem your God, who took you out of Egypt, the house of bondage. Who has lead you through the great and terrible desert, snake, serpent, and scorpion, and thirst without water; who has brought forth water for you from the rock of flint. Who has fed you manna in the desert, which your fathers did not know, IN ORDER to afflict you and IN ORDER to test you, to benefit you in the end. (8,14-16).

In both cases, the manna is highlighted as the quintessence of the total experience. In both cases, the experience is introduced as being "affliction" ("inui"). Since, in the first case, the "inui" is coupled with "made you hungry," the simplest explanation is that the verse is describing a time-sequence: FIRST, God afflicted you and made you hungry (by taking you into the desert where there was no food), and THEN He gave you food from the sky, which was not affliction but a great blessing (See Ibn Ezra, first explanation; and Ramban, second explanation, 8,3). According to this explanation, the phrase "which you did not know, nor did your fathers know," is also an expression of praise - this miracle represented a sign of God's grace which your fathers did not experience. (The Ramban quotes a midrash which interprets the phrase this way).

There are two difficulties with this explanation, however. Firstly, the second section does not lend itself to this interpretation. There it says that God "fed you the manna, which your fathers did not know, IN ORDER to afflict you." The affliction did not precede the manna, but was part and parcel of the experience itself. Secondly, 8,3 repeats the phrasing of 8,2, where the entire desert experience ("forty years in the desert") are described as "IN ORDER to afflict you and test you." The relationship between the two verses resembles a "klal u-prat" - in general, the desert experience was an affliction and a test, and specifically, God afflicted you with the manna. The later verse ((8,16) repeats these phrases concerning the manna - "Who fed you the manna... IN ORDER to afflict you, and IN ORDER to test you...." Similarly, the conclusion of the first section reads, "And you shall know in your heart that, as a father chastens ("yiyaser" - the same root as yisurim, suffering) his son, so HaShem your God chastens you" (8,5). It seems clear that the Torah is presenting the desert as a time of "affliction" in general, with the message and moral being found somehow in that affliction.

This is supported by examining the wider context of these verses. You are coming, Moshe says in verse 1, to the land promised by God to your fathers. Remember, he admonishes, the desert years, where you were "afflicted" (2-5), for God is bringing you to "a good land, a land of streams of water, springs and depths which burst forth in the valleys and the hills; a land of wheat, and barley, and vines, and figs, and pomegranates, a land of oil-olives and honey; a land where you shall not eat bread in misery ("bimiskeinut" - Targum Yonatan translates it as "want", Ibn Ezra as "poverty"), nothing shall be lacking in it...." (7-10). Moshe then warns them: Do not forget God when you have houses, flocks, and silver, God who led you through the desert where there was great thirst and no water (but He gave you water from a rock), no food (but He gave you food from heaven) (12-18). It is clear that the parasha is based on a comparison between the plenty of the Land of Israel with the deprivation of the desert. The beautiful description of the riches of Eretz Yisrael in verses 7-9, when viewed in context, is not intended to arouse in us a love for the land, but, on the contrary, to warn us of its perils, as it is the polar opposite of the present situation in the desert, and therefore presents the danger of forgetting God.

What then is the meaning of "inui," of "miskeinut", and how is having manna for forty years the opposite of the "good land." The answer is not that there was not enough food to satisfy the physical hunger of the Jews in the desert. The manna provided the exact amount of nutrition necessary. The difference is psychological. The manna is not something that one HAS! It cannot be possessed, for it cannot be hoarded. The Jew in the desert, therefore, does not possess in HIS OWN POWER the means of his sustenance. He has no food for tomorrow. This is the meaning of "affliction." Not eating on Yom Kippur is called "inui." This does not mean that one should suffer hunger pangs (one of the reasons given for the mitzva to eat on the eve of Yom Kippur is to prevent hunger pangs!). The act of putting the food out of bounds, of denying oneself the possibility of eating, is "inui" from the first moment that Yom Kippur begins. Similarly, the Jews in the desert, even though their hunger was always assuaged, were afflicted because they had no way to ensure that there would be food tomorrow. They were "miskeinim" in the sense of poor, wanting, because they had nothing. Notice that in the Land of Israel, in the verse that serves as the source for the mitzva of birkat ha-mazon (grace after meals), we are told that we shall eat and be SATIATED, and therefore bless God - not for the food, but for the "good land which He has given you!" The experience in the land is one of a good, rich land which gives forth crops - wheat, barley, fruits; of great flocks and herds; of money (gold and silver) in the bank. The desert had only manna, plenty of it, but never enough to last until tomorrow.

What does one learn from that? That man does not live by bread alone. The difference between desert and Land is not one of two different kinds of riches, provided by God from different sources, once the sky, once the land. God as the source of manna is not merely a substitute for a rich soil. Manna is dependent on God's WILL. Wheat is dependent, apparently, on the attributes on the soil and the weather. The second gives rise to the ILLUSION that one can be truly rich, one can have within one's own power the resources to guarantee one's continued welfare. To prevent that illusion from taking hold even as God gives us the good land, we are enjoined to remember the "affliction" of being without a physical basis for food, even though we had food, just as we should remember how our clothes did not fade nor our feet blister during those forty years. There is no real basis for existence other than "the utterances of the mouth of God."

This picture of the desert is clearly depicted in the second section. "... the great and terrible desert - snake, serpent, and scorpion, a thirst without water." The physical conditions of the desert are that life cannot be sustained - there is no water, and if there is anything, it is snake, serpent and scorpion. You of course had water, and never met a scorpion, so that YOU lacked nothing, but the desert lacked everything. This, I think, is the proper meaning of the repeated phrase, "which your fathers did not know." Manna is not known to your fathers - in other words, it is not food. The difference between wheat and manna is not one of local habit; it is not the difference between pizza in Italy and felafel in Beirut. Manna is not the food of Sinai - it is unknown, never known, neither to you nor to your fathers. There was NO FOOD IN SINAI - but you ate anyway, because human existence is not dependent on the habitat, or on one's bank, or flocks, but on the utterances of God's mouth.

This is also the basis of the meaning of the "test" - "in order to afflict you and in order to TEST you" (8,2; 16). The verb-root NaSaH is found here as well as in the introduction to the akeda - "And God tested Avraham." Due to the obvious theological problems, the phrase has given rise to an extensive exegetical and philosophical literature. The first appearance of the verb in our parasha (8,2) supports the usual understanding of a test in order to find out something, much like a test in school - "...in order to afflict you, to test you, to know that which is in your heart, whether you will observe His commandments or not." However, the second appearance (8,16) gives no hint that the object of the "test" is to obtain knowledge. The verse describes the goal of the test as "to benefit you in the end." I think the meaning of NaSaH is to test in the medieval sense - to put one to the test, to bring out the true mettle inherent in something (see Ramban on the opening of the akeda for one version of this sense of the word). "To know that which is in your heart" is parallel to the conclusion of this first section - "And you shall know in your heart...." (8,5); in other words, to achieve a deep understanding and commitment to something. Philosophically, the Jews may well have agreed forty years earlier that all wordly success depends on the will of God, but true realization of this principle and psychological relief from the danger of "my might and the power of my arm" comes only after years of direct experiential dependence on God, on manna from heaven.

So, which sort of existence is better - eating manna, or eating the fruit of the good land? There can be no question as to the opinion of Torah on this matter. The whole purpose of the desert experience was to "benefit you in the end." It is an INTRODUCTION to entering the land. But if we are supposed to view the riches of the land as illusionary, as embodying no more than the message that man does not live on bread alone, what is gained by entering the land?

I am sure everyone of you can offer an answer to this question. There is only a slight hint of an answer in the parasha. Every time the Torah refers to the goodness of the land, it states that this is because of the promise or the covenant with our forefathers.

All the commandments which I command you this day shall you observe to do, in order that you may live and multiply, and come to inherit the land WHICH GOD HAS PROMISED TO YOUR FATHERS. And you shall remember the entire way which God led you for forty years in the desert....(8,1-2).

And you shall remember HaShem your God, for He is who has given you the strength to accumulate wealth, IN ORDER to fulfill His covenant which He swore to your fathers as this day (8,17).

The standard promise to the forefathers, their hope and destiny, was, of course, that they would inherit the land. The mitzva associated with the land, at least in this parasha, is "And you shall eat and be satiated, and you shall bless HaShem your God, for the good land He has given you. I think there is a difference between thanking God for the manna, and blessing God for the land which HE HAS GIVEN YOU. Blessing is endowing something with kedusha, strengthening God's presence in the mundane; in other words, in OUR land. The desert is God's land - that is the basis for the clarity of its metaphysical status as testimony to the primacy of God's will as the source of all good. The Land of Israel is our land - and therefore, with God's help and bearing in my mind the lesson of the desert, it is the arena for blessing, for endowing man's realm with presence of God. There is a delicate balance here between total dependence on God's direct power and will, and arrogant arrogation of efficiency to the power of one's own arm. My house, my crops - they are indeed what I have done and received from heaven like manna. That is why they are appropriate objects over which to affirm that man ultimately lives by all the utterances of God's mouth.

Further study:

1. The section discussed uses the term "lima'an" - in order to - many times (look and count). It is not immediately obvious how all these different purposes of God can be reconciled. Try and work out a coherent account of "why" God has done, based on each of these reasons.

2. There are multiple references to a command to KNOW - "veyadata" (9,3; 6); "veyadata im levavekha" (8,5); "lima'an hodiakha" (8,3); as well as other mental actions ("in the heart") - 8,2; 14; 17. One might say that the entire parasha (up until "Vehaya im shamoa") is concerned with inner man - knowledge, memory ("vezakharta"), the heart. This is nearly unique in the Torah (compare to Vaetchanan and Re'ei). Try and understanding the position of this parasha in Moshe's speeches in Devarim in this light.

3. Why is the retelling of the sin of the golden calf (9,7-29) postponed until after the section discussed in the shiur?

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