

Torah Table Talk – *Pirke Avot*

Every Mitzvah Makes a Difference

Parshat Ekev, Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25

Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt

With love to their grandchildren

Elka, Joshua, Lindsay, Oren z”l, Jenny, David, Lauren, Kayla, Zenna, and Emily

The Book of Deuteronomy fascinates me. In some ways it is the most personal and intimate book in the Torah. It also sets the tone for the upcoming holiday season. Moses, at the end of his career, addresses the people of Israel, expressing his hopes, dreams and fears for the people of Israel. He reviews the terms of their covenant with God adding new elements that were not mentioned up until now. But Moses is not just speaking to the people of his generation. The great prophet of Israel is speaking to each generation of Israel. This is his living will – it is an expression of his essential values and ideals for all generations. When we read *Sefer Devarim*, then, we are standing on the shore of the Jordan River in the valley of Peor along with the people of Israel. We are about to take the next step in our life journey. With the High Holy Days looming in the immediate future, we too face an uncertain but challenging future. It is a time to look back on our lives, to reflect on our actions and to consider our future.

The opening verses of *Parshat Ekev* state the essential teaching of the book of Deuteronomy: that there are negative and positive consequences to our actions. When we live up to the commandments and the covenant, there will be blessings for the community of Israel and when we fail to do so, we face negative consequences. The truth is life is not so simple or straight forward. The sages wondered why, if there is reward for good behavior and punishment when we transgress, they witnessed “righteous people who suffered when wicked people who seemed to have so much goodness in their life.” Moses’ theory of consequences frames his presentation of the *mitzvot*. As Jews living in a different time we wrestle with this notion. What are our obligations and responsibilities? Are there major and minor *mitzvot* and if so, what is the difference between them? And if we no longer understand this notion of consequences quite so literally why live by the *mitzvot*?

Pirke Avot 2:1 Rabbi (Yehudah Ha-Nasi said: Be as scrupulous about a minor *mitzvah* as of a major one, for you do not know the reward allotted for each precept. Balance the loss incurred by the fulfillment of a precept against the gain and the accruing from a transgression against the loss it involves. Reflect on three things and you will never come to sin: Know what is above you --a seeing eye, a hearing ear, and all your deeds recorded in a book

Pirke Avot 4:2 Ben Azzai said: Be eager to fulfill the smallest duty and flee from transgression; for one duty induces another and one transgression induces another transgression. The reward of a duty is a duty, the reward of one transgression is another transgression.

Sources

Deuteronomy 7:12

And if (*ekev*) you obey these rules and observe them carefully, the Lord your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers.

Rabbi Shlomo Ben Isaac Rashi’s Commentary on Deut. 7:12

And if (*ekev*) you obey: If the commandments of minor importance which one tramples upon with ones heels (*ekvotav*, i.e. which one treats lightly) “you will obey them” then the Lord shall keep – He will keep his promise to you.

Moses Maimonides, Commentary on the Mishnah

It is fitting to be as scrupulous in observing those *mitzvot* that one considers ‘minor,’ such as rejoicing on the festival or learning Hebrew, as one is in observing commandments which are considered ‘major,’ such as circumcision, or *tzitzit*, or the Passover sacrifice, since one does not know the reward for any of the *mitzvot*. Within the Torah we find many *mitzvot*, positive and negative. For the negative commandments there are different penalties, for some of which one incurs the death penalty and for others other punishments...But for the positive commandments, the Torah does not reveal the reward for any of them. This is so we do not make a distinction between those commandments we think we must observe and which commandments are of lesser importance. The Torah commands us to perform each and every act and does not inform us which one is greater

in the presence of the Holy One since we should observe all of them. It is for this reason that we find the principle: “One who observes a *mitzvah* (no matter what it is) is exempt from performing another *mitzvah*” since we cannot differentiate between the *mitzvah* one is performing and the other one that comes along and interferes.

Mishnah Peah 1:1

The following are the activities for which a person is rewarded in this world, and again in the world-to-come: honoring one’s father and mother, deeds of loving kindness, and making peace between a person and his neighbor. The study of Torah, however, is as important as all of them together.

Commentary

The word *ekev* means ‘on the heels of,’ or ‘as a consequence of.’ Rashi, emphasizing the literal meaning of the word, understands *ekev* as a reference to those commandments which we would trample underfoot because they are seemingly unimportant or insignificant. These commandments also deserve our attention.

The sages are playful in addressing the issue of major and minor *mitzvot*. On the one hand they seem to be telling us that all the commandments are of equal importance and deserve our attention; on the other hand, even they distinguish between minor (*kallot*) and major (*hamurot*) *mitzvot*. A better translation of these words might be: *kallot*, light, and *hamurot*, heavy. Some *mitzvot* simply strike us as ‘lite.’ They take little effort and the consequence of observing (or not observing) them seems inconsequential. Rabbi Judah suggests that there is no such thing as an inconsequential *mitzvah*. For Maimonides and the other sages judging the consequence of a *mitzvah* might be based on the reward or punishment for its performance or non-performance, or it might be based on the amount of effort that must go into the fulfillment of the *mitzvah*. Major or minor might also have something to do with the impact the *mitzvah* has on the community or on the lives of others. I suspect, that every generation, de facto placed more emphasis on some *mitzvot* than others; this is culturally and sociologically determined.

It is interesting that there are only two *mitzvot* about which we are told what the reward for their performance is. One is honoring one’s parents and the other is *shiluah ha-ken*, chasing away a mother bird before taking eggs from her nest. In both cases we are told “that you may long endure in the land that Adonai is giving you.” These two *mitzvot* could not be more different: how can one compare the efforts one must put into honoring parents with the simple act of protecting a mother bird? And yet the reward is the same in both cases. We cannot always know how simple and effortless acts can change the world!

We are left to wonder whether some *mitzvot* are more important than others. Are some *mitzvot* *kallot*, light, while others are *hamurot*, weighty, in their significance? The sages may have emphasized the equal importance of all the commandments but in reality we do make distinctions and emphasize some *mitzvot* more than others – rightfully or wrongly. In some communities there is a great deal of emphasis on *Tikkun Olam* at the expense of the ritual and in other communities there is little thought given to the moral dimension of life if it does not affect one’s fellow Jews. Given that few observe all the *mitzvot*, how is one to decide what one’s priorities should be in taking on Jewish practices?

Questions to Ponder

1. How does Maimonides distinguish major and minor *mitzvot*? How would you distinguish between a minor and a major *mitzvot*? Which *mitzvot* would you consider major and minor?
2. Rabbi Judah and Ben Azzai have different philosophies on why and how we fulfill the *mitzvot*. How are they different from one another? Which do you find personally most meaningful? Which fits best with our contemporary outlook on the world?
3. The Mishnah from Peah lists a number of *mitzvot* which one receives a reward in this world as well as a reward in the world to come. Why do you think Rabbi Judah (the editor of the *Mishnah*) set these *mitzvot* apart as major *mitzvot*? Why does he consider the study of Torah equal to all the other *mitzvot*?
4. If the notion of reward and punishment as a reason for the performance of the *mitzvot* troubles you, what reasons would you give to explain why one should perform *mitzvot*?

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