

5780 - Deuteronomy 7-11 - Eikev (“As a consequence of ...”)

In *Ekev*, Moses continues his second address, setting out in broad terms the principles of the covenant the Israelites made with God, and what it demands of them as a chosen nation in a Promised Land. **If they are faithful to the covenant, they will be blessed materially as well as spiritually. But they should not attribute their success to themselves or their righteousness.** Moses reminds them of the people’s sins during the wilderness years, the Golden Calf the Korah rebellion, and other such episodes. He reminds them, too, of God’s forgiveness. Remembering their history, they are to love and revere God and teach their children to do likewise. This entire complex of beliefs is summarised in the passage that became the second paragraph of the *Shema* (Deut. 11:13-21). **Israel’s fate depends on Israel’s faith.**

1. “If they are faithful to the covenant,” wouldn’t they be considered “righteousness”? And if they *are* “righteous” don’t they deserve to “be blessed materially”? But even when they *do* walk in God’s ways, and God blesses them for doing so, “they should not attribute their success to themselves ...”

a. Psalm 143:2

²for **no one living is righteous before you.**

b. Ecclesiastes 7:20

²⁰Indeed, there is **no one on earth who is righteous ...**

c. Romans 3:10

¹⁰As it is written: “There is **no one righteous**, not even one ...

d. Habakkuk 2:4

⁴“... but **the righteous person will live by his faithfulness ...**”

The first of the following essays is about why Moses, in Deuteronomy, speaks so persistently about the importance of collective memory and the danger of forgetfulness. What has this to do with politics and society? **The second is about another of Deuteronomy’s keywords: love. Why is this so central to Judaism, and why does Moses speak about it here more than in the Torah’s previous books?** The third is about the emphasis, here and in the previous *parasha*, on the duty of parents to educate their children; Israel was to become a nation of educators. The fourth concerns an unusual description of Israel’s geography and climate. Why was this land chosen to become the holy land? Is there a connection between landscape and spirituality? The last essay reflects on a passage in the *parasha* that became the basis for the rabbinic teaching that “where you find greatness, there you find humility.”

The Morality of Love¹

Something implicit in the Torah from the very beginning becomes explicit in the book of Deuteronomy. **God is the God of love. More than we love Him, He loves us.** Here, for instance, is the beginning of *Parashat Ekev*:

If you pay attention to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep his **covenant of love** [*et habrit ve’et ha-chesed*] with you, as He swore to your ancestors. He will **love** (*v’ahavcha*) you and bless you and increase your numbers. (Deut. 7:12-13)

Again in the *parasha* we read:

To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth, and everything in it. Yet the Lord set His affection on your ancestors and **loved** (*l’ahavah*) them, and He chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today. (Deut. 10:14-15)

And here is a verse from *Parashat Va’etchanan*: “Because He **loved** (*ahav*) your ancestors and chose their descendants after them, He brought you out of Egypt by His Presence and His great strength” (Deut. 4:37).

The book of Deuteronomy is saturated with the language of love.

The root **A-H-V** appears in Exodus twice, in Leviticus twice (both in Lev. 19), in Numbers not at all—and **in Deuteronomy twenty-three times.** Deuteronomy is a book about societal beatitude and the transformative power of love.

Nothing could be more misleading and invidious (*insulting, unfair*) than the contrast between **Christianity as a religion of love and forgiveness and Judaism as a religion of law and retribution.** As I have noted elsewhere,⁽¹⁾ and as David Konstan has argued in *Before Forgiveness*, the idea of forgiveness as opposed to mere appeasement (*placation, pacification*) was born in Judaism.⁽²⁾ Interpersonal forgiveness began when Joseph forgave his brothers for selling him into slavery. Divine forgiveness entered the Jewish calendar with the institution of Yom Kippur as the supreme day of divine pardon following the sin of the Golden Calf.

Similarly with love: **when the New Testament speaks of love it does so by direct quotation from Leviticus: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (19:18) and Deuteronomy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your might” (6:5).**

2. Matthew 19:16-22 (cf., Luke 10:25-28)

¹⁶Just then a man came up to Yeshua and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” ... ¹⁷If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.” ¹⁸“Which ones?” he inquired. Yeshua replied, “You shall not murder (Exo 20:13), you shall not commit adultery (Exo

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, *Covenant and Conversation, Deuteronomy*, (Maggid Books & The Orthodox Union), pp. 93-98.

20:14), you shall not steal (Exo 20:15), you shall not give false testimony (Exo 20:16), ¹⁹'honor your father and mother' (Exo 20:12), and **'love your neighbor as yourself'**" (Lev 19:18). ²⁰"All these I have kept," the young man said. "What do I still lack?" ²¹Yeshua answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." ²²When the young man heard this, **he went away sad, because he had great wealth.**

a. Matthew 22:36-40 (cf. Mark 12:31-33)

³⁶"Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷Yeshua replied: **"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind"** (Deu 6:5) ... ³⁹And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself' (Lev 19:18) ...

b. Romans 13:8-10

⁸Let no debt remain outstanding, except **the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law** (Lev 19:18). ⁹The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery," "You shall not murder," "You shall not steal," "You shall not covet," and whatever other command there may be, **are summed up in this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself"** (Lev 19:18). ¹⁰Love does no harm to a neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.

c. Galatians 5:13-15

¹³**serve one another humbly in love.** ¹⁴**For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself"** (Lev 19:18).

d. James 2:8-13

⁸**If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, "Love your neighbor as yourself"** (Lev 19:18), **you are doing right** ... ¹²**Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom,** ¹³**because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful.** Mercy triumphs over judgment.

e. Romans 3:28-4:3

²⁸For we maintain that a person is justified by faith ... ³¹Do we ... nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law.

⁴¹What then shall we say that Abraham ... discovered in this matter? ... ³What does Scripture say? **"Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."**

As philosopher Simon May puts it in his splendid book, *Love: A History*:

The widespread belief that the Hebrew Bible is all about vengeance and "an eye for an eye," while the Gospels supposedly invent love as an unconditional and universal value, must therefore count **as one of the most extraordinary misunderstandings in all of Western history.** For

the Hebrew Bible is the source not just of the two love commandments but of a larger moral vision inspired by wonder for love's power.⁽³⁾

His judgement is unequivocal: "If love in the Western world has a founding text, that text is Hebrew."⁽⁴⁾

More than this: in *Ethical Life: The Past and Present of Ethical Cultures*, philosopher Harry Redner distinguishes four basic visions of the ethical life in the history of civilisations.⁽⁵⁾ One he calls *civic ethics*, the ethics of ancient Greece and Rome. Second is the *ethic of duty*, which he identifies with Confucianism, Krishnaism, and late Stoicism. Third is the *ethic of honour*, a distinctive combination of courtly and military decorum to be found among Persians, Arabs, and Turks as well as in medieval Christianity (the "chivalrous knight") and Islam.

The fourth vision of the ethical life, which he calls simply *morality*, he traces to Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He defines it simply as "the ethic of love," and represents what made the West morally unique:

The biblical "love of one's neighbor" is a very special form of love, a unique development of the Judaic religion and unlike any to be encountered outside it. It is a supremely altruistic love, for to love one's neighbor as oneself means always to put oneself in his place and to act on his behalf as one would naturally and selfishly act on one's own.⁽⁶⁾

To be sure, Buddhism also makes space for the idea of love, though it is differently inflected, more impersonal, and unrelated to a relationship with God.

What is radical about this idea is that, first, the Torah insists, against virtually the whole of the ancient world, that the elements that constitute reality are neither hostile nor indifferent to humankind. We are here because Someone wanted us to be, One who cares about us, watches over us, and seeks our well-being.

Second, the love with which God created the universe is not just divine. **It is to serve as the model for us in our humanity.** We are bidden to love the neighbour and the stranger, to engage in acts of kindness and compassion, and to build a society based on love.

3. Matthew 25:31-46

³⁵For I was **hungry** and you gave me something to eat, I was **thirsty** and you gave me something to drink, I was **a stranger** and you invited me in, ³⁶I **needed clothes** and you clothed me, **I was sick** and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' ³⁷"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry ... or thirsty ... ³⁸When did we see you a stranger ... or needing clothes ... ³⁹When did we see you sick or in prison ... ?' ⁴⁰"The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' ⁴¹"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from

me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. ⁴²For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, ⁴³I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' ⁴⁴"They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' ⁴⁵"He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' ⁴⁶"Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

a. Psalm 107:5-9

⁸Let them give thanks to the LORD for his unfailing love and his wonderful deeds for mankind, ⁹for **he satisfies the thirsty and fills the hungry with good things.**

b. Sotah 14a

R. Hama son of R. Hanina said: "After the Lord your God shall ye walk" (Deut. 13:5). But is it possible for a man to walk right behind the Presence? Has it not already been said, "The Lord thy God is a devouring fire" (Deut. 4:24)? Yes, but what the verse means is that you are to follow the ways of the Holy One. **He clothed the naked:** "The Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skin, and clothed them" (Gen. 3:21). **So should you clothe the naked. The Holy One visited the sick:** "The Lord appeared unto him in the terebinths of Mamre" (Gen. 18:1). **So should you visit the sick. The Holy One buried the dead:** "He buried [Moses] in the valley" (Deut. 34:6). **So should you bury the dead. The Holy One comforted mourners:** "And it came to pass after the death of Abraham that God bestowed blessing upon Isaac his son" (Gen. 25:11). **So should you comfort mourners.**

c. Testament of Joseph² 1:5-7 (OPE)

⁵I was sold into slavery, and the Lord of all made me free: I was taken into captivity, and His strong hand succoured me. I was beset with hunger, and the Lord Himself nourished me. ⁶I was alone, and God comforted me: **I was sick, and the Lord visited me:** I was in prison, and my God showed favour unto me; In bonds, and He re-

leased me; ⁷Slandered, and He pleaded my cause; Bitterly spoken against by the Egyptians, and He delivered me; Envied by my fellow-slaves, and He exalted me ...

d. Luke 6:36

³⁶**Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.**

e. John 13:33-35

³⁴"A new command I give you: Love one another. **As I have loved you, so you must love one another.**

f. **It is NOT our job to rid the world of evil—or to identify the sin in everyone else's life—it is to reflect God's character and have a benevolent impact in the lives of others.**

Here is how *Parashat Ekev* puts it:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty, and awesome God who shows no partiality and accepts no bribes. He defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. So you must love the stranger, for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt. (Deut. 10:18-19)

In short: **God created the world in love and forgiveness and asks us to love and forgive others.** I believe that to be the most profound moral idea in human history.

There is, however, an obvious question. Why is it that love, which plays so great a part in the book of Deuteronomy, is so much less in evidence in the earlier books of Exodus, Leviticus (with the exception of Lev. 19), and Numbers?

The best way of answering that question is to ask another: Why is it that forgiveness plays no part—at least on the surface of the narrative—in the book of Genesis.)⁷ God does not forgive Adam and Eve or Cain (though He mitigates their punishment). Forgiveness does not figure in the stories of the Flood, the Tower of Babel, or the destruction of Sodom and the cities of the plain (Abraham's plea is that the cities be spared if they contain fifty or ten righteous people; this is not a plea for forgiveness). Divine forgiveness makes its first appearance in the book of Exodus after Moses' successful plea in the wake of the Golden Calf, and is then institutionalised in the form of Yom Kippur (Lev. 16), but not before. Why so?

The simple, radical answer is: **God does not forgive human beings until human beings learn to forgive one another.** Genesis ends with Joseph forgiving his brothers. Only thereafter does God forgive human beings.

4. Matthew 6:14-15

¹⁴For **if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.** ¹⁵But **if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.**

² The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs contain a substantial amount of prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah. From a Christian perspective, a number of statements can be associated with events in the life of (Yeshua). Many consider this significant since several of the books are thought to predate (Yeshua). This opinion ... is hardly defended in modern scholarship, where all passages that clearly refer to (Yeshua), are either considered Christian interpolations (by those who consider the author to be Jewish) or Christian writings (by those who consider the author to be Christian).

a. Matthew 18:23-35

²³"Therefore, the kingdom of heaven is like a king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants. ²⁴As he began the settlement, a man who owed him **ten thousand bags of gold** was brought to him. ²⁵Since he was not able to pay, the master ordered that he and his (family) ... be sold to repay the debt. ²⁶"At this the servant fell on his knees before him. 'Be patient with me,' he begged, 'and I will pay back everything.' ²⁷**The servant's master took pity on him, canceled the debt and let him go.** ²⁸"But when that servant went out, he found one of his fellow servants who owed him **a hundred silver coins**. He grabbed him and began to choke him. 'Pay back what you owe me!' he demanded. ²⁹"His fellow servant fell to his knees and begged him, 'Be patient with me, and I will pay it back.' ³⁰**But he refused.** Instead, he went off and had the man thrown into prison until he could pay the debt. ³¹When the other servants saw what had happened, they were outraged and went and told their master everything that had happened. ³²"Then the master called the servant in. 'You wicked servant,' he said, 'I canceled all that debt of yours because you begged me to. ³³**Shouldn't you have had mercy on your fellow servant just as I had on you?' ...** ³⁵**This is how my heavenly Father will treat each of you unless you forgive your brother or sister from your heart."**

b. Mark 11:25

²⁵... if you hold anything against anyone, **forgive them, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins."**

c. Colossians 3:13

¹³Bear with each other and **forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.**

Turning to love: Genesis contains many references to it. Abraham loves Isaac. Isaac loves Esau. Rebecca loves Jacob. Jacob loves Rachel. He also loves Joseph. There is interpersonal love in plentiful supply. **But almost all the loves of Genesis turn out to be divisive.** They lead to tension between Jacob and Esau, between Rachel and Leah, and between Joseph and his brothers. Implicit in Genesis is a profound observation missed by most moralists and theologians. Love in and of itself—real love, personal and passionate, the kind of love that suffuses much of the prophetic literature as well as the Song of Songs, the greatest love song in Tanakh, as opposed to the detached, generalised love called *agape* which we associate with ancient Greece—is not sufficient as a basis for society. It can divide as well as unite.

Hence it does not figure as a major motif until we reach the integrated social-moral-political vision of Deuteronomy **which combines love and justice.** *Tzedek*, justice, turns out to be another key word of Deuteronomy,

appearing eighteen times. It appears only four times in Exodus, not at all in Numbers, and in Leviticus only in chapter 19, the only chapter that also contains the word "love." In other words, **in Judaism love and justice go hand in hand.** Again this is noted by Simon May:

[W]hat we must note here, for it is fundamental to the history of Western love, is the remarkable and radical justice that underlies the love commandment of Leviticus. Not a cold justice in which due deserts are mechanically handed out, but the justice that brings the other, as an individual with needs and interests, into a relationship of respect. All our neighbours are to be recognised as equal to ourselves before the law of love. **Justice and love therefore become inseparable.**⁽⁸⁾

Love without justice leads to rivalry, and eventually to hate. Justice without love is devoid of the humanising forces of compassion and mercy. We need both. This unique ethical vision—the love of God for humans and of humans for God, translated into an ethic of love towards both neighbour and stranger—is the foundation of Western civilisation and its abiding glory.

It is born here in the book of Deuteronomy, the book of law-as-love and love-as-law.

- (1) See, for example, "What It Takes to Forgive" (<http://rabbisacks.org/takes-for-give-vayechi-5778/>) and "The Day Forgiveness Was Born" (<http://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-5772-vayigash-the-day-forgiveness-was-born/>).
- (2) David Konstan, *Before Forgiveness: The Origins of a Moral Idea* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
- (3) Simon May, *Love: A History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2011), 19-20.
- (4) *Ibid.*, 14.
- (5) Harry Redner, *Ethical Life: The Past and Present of Ethical Cultures* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001).
- (6) *Ibid.*, 50.
- (7) I exclude, here, midrashic readings of these texts, some of which do make reference to forgiveness.
- (8) May, *Love: A History*, 17.

5. Psalm 33:5

⁵The LORD loves righteousness and **justice**; the earth is full of his **unfailing love**.

a. Hosea 12:2-6

⁶But you must return to your God; **maintain love and justice ...**

b. Amos 5:15

¹⁵Hate evil, **love good; maintain justice** in the courts.

c. Psalm 101:1

¹I will sing of your **love and justice ...**

d. Luke 11:42

⁴²Woe to you Pharisees ... because you neglect **justice** and the **love** of God ...