

D'var Torah on Parshat Eikev

In the spring of 2012, I celebrated Passover in the expansive Panamint Valley of Southern California, a vast, dry, desert landscape nestled inside an awesome semi-circle of small mountain peaks. During our Shabbat and holiday prayers, spiritual leader Zelig Golden spoke to us about how Pesach, in the traditional biblical calendar, marks the end of the rainy season. For California though, he pointed out, "This year is different - the rains haven't come." California was in the midst of a drought that would end up lasting several more years. Between 2012 and 2016, most of the state of California was under extreme drought conditions. While this intense drought itself is over, the effects on trees, aquatic animals, rural water access, and more are expected to be felt for decades.¹

At that moment, in a tent village in the desert, the sanctity of water was ever-present. Every drop of water was not to be taken for granted, and I felt its preciousness as a resource with every drink that kept me hydrated and alive. As we sang together on Shabbat morning of the festival, we saw some clouds looming in the distance. In a flash, it seemed our prayers for rain were answered - HARD - as rains poured down. The tarps on top of our "tent of meeting" began to fill and create small waterfalls throughout the structure. People danced, and children carved riverbeds in the ground. Quickly, concerns of scarcity morphed into concerns of how we would manage *too much* rain. Would our tent structures stay up? Would the outdoor kitchen still function? I found myself wondering how our ancient ancestors navigated such wondrous and frightening conditions. A deep awareness of our dependence on balance of rainfall - the right amount, at the right time - was alive that day.

My time in the desert reminded me very viscerally of the second paragraph of the Shema, found in this week's parsha. We read:

Deuteronomy Ch 11:

(13) If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving " your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, (14) I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. (15) I will also provide grass in the fields for your

¹ Jay Lund et al., "Lessons from California's 2012–2016 Drought: Journal of Water Resources Planning and Management: Vol 144, No 10," Journal of Water Resources Planning and Management (American Society of Civil Engineers, July 30, 2018), <https://ascelibrary.org/doi/full/10.1061/%28ASCE%29WR.1943-5452.0000984>.

cattle—and thus you shall eat your fill. (16) Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them. (17) For "s anger will flare up against you, and God will shut up the skies so that there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce; and you will soon perish from the good land that " is assigning to you.

This paragraph had been largely skipped over in my Jewish education for years. In fact, I did not even realize this paragraph existed as part of the Shema text until I studied in Israel in my 20s. Progressive Jews have sometimes shied away from the ostensibly harsh theology conveyed here. If people worshiped idols would God literally change the weather? Was God on a mission to starve people for their sins? Yet, I can't help but think it is worth taking another look, with an openness to seeing these words in a new light. In the era of climate change in particular, I wondered what teachings might emerge from delving deeper into some environmental science behind these descriptions as well.

Biblical Food Chains and Climate Patterns

It is no surprise that ancient Israelites would have relied heavily on predictable rain patterns. In what almost sounds like a gardeners manual, the prelude to this paragraph of the Shema in fact contrasts the landscape they are about to enter in “the promised land” with the prior climate in Egypt:

Deuteronomy 11: “10) For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden; 11) but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. 12) It is a land which " your God looks after, on which " your God always keeps an eye, from year's beginning to year's end.”

There must have been a pervasive, deep awareness of everyone's fate being tied to the rains of heaven. Both the “early rains,” around October, and the “late rains” would have been essential to their thriving and deeply ingrained in social consciousness in the region.² Seemingly in contrast to the human-driven cultivation of the grain in Egypt, there is emphasis in Eretz Yisrael that God is keeping an eye on the rains and the land. It is almost as if God is a stand-in for their awareness of the weather patterns that were beyond their control.

² Borowski, Oded. “Seasons, Crops and Water in the Land of the Bible.” In *Behind the Scenes of The Old Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts*, eds. Jonathan S. Greer, John W. Hilber, and John H. Walton (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2018), 412.

There is also a deep awareness of just how far-reaching the impact of rain patterns can be for the entire society. Naturally, the “*grass in your fields for your cattle*” (Deut 11: 15) requires enough rain to grow, yet not SO much rain that fields are flooded and unfit for grazing. If this balance is achieved, the humans are also nourished - “*and thus you shall eat your fill.*” It is a simple yet tremendously important reflection of levels of the food chain in this system: Grass, as the producers, can only grow with appropriate water and nutrients. Cows, as consumers, need the grass (and their own water access) to survive. Humans can only benefit from the grazing cows - whether through enjoying their milk, eating them for meat, or utilizing the fertilizer they add to the soil - if the cows are healthy.³

The cause and effect for *not* following God’s instructions is also clear - God will be angry, the rains will not fall, the ground will not grow food, and you, too, will perish. The interconnectedness of every level of living and non-living elements of the ecosystem is carefully highlighted here. Precipitation is at the core of maintaining order in each of these levels, and its effects ripple outward (pun intended!).

Climate Change and Shifting Patterns

We know today that humans, too, have an impact on the “rains of heaven.” Across the world, precipitation norms are shifting. The EPA has noted that on average, total annual precipitation over land areas has increased both in the US and worldwide. Warming temperatures have led to increased evaporation and thus increased rainfall.⁴ Average precipitation in the contiguous 48 US states has increased at twice the rate (0.2 inch / decade) that the average global precipitation has increased.⁵ In addition to total volumes increasing, more of the precipitation has come from “extreme one-day precipitation events,”⁶ such as severe storms, hurricanes, etc. At the same time, certain

³ “Food Chains and Food Webs” (United States Environmental Protection Agency), accessed April 21, 2022, <https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/foodchainsandfoodwebs.pdf>.

⁴ “Climate Change Indicators: Heavy Precipitation,” EPA (Environmental Protection Agency, April 2021), <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-heavy-precipitation>.

⁵ “Climate Change Indicators: US and Global Precipitation,” EPA (United States Environmental Protection Agency, April 2021), <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-us-and-global-precipitation>.

⁶ *Ibid.*

areas of the world like the Southwest of the United States have had *decreased* precipitation on the whole. Whether or not we are living in the biblical land of Israel, humans across the globe are increasingly feeling the urgency that we all need “rain for your land in season,” at the right time, and in the right amounts.

The effects of increased or decreased precipitation can be far-reaching. For drought conditions, like described in the biblical passage where God “shut up the skies,” it can impact water quality, air quality, and available food sources. Less water means wildfires become more prevalent, and extra pollutants end up in streams and other bodies of water through runoff. Extra water pollution means disruption for aquatic ecosystems and death of many fish and other species. Insufficient water stores through wells or other irrigation systems mean many crops cannot grow. To return to California, for instance, in recent years many Almond farmers have had to choose only a portion of their fields to irrigate, leaving some trees to die.⁷ Human health is also impacted by the dry air of drought conditions, as air pollutants can increase complications for people with chronic respiratory conditions. The bleakness of a drought would eventually reach us all.

Too much rain, on the other hand, can also be devastating. Heavy rains can lead to flooding and soil erosion, which similarly impacts water quality. Excess rain runoff can deposit too much agricultural fertilizer in bodies of water and cause overgrowth of microorganisms like algae, while depleting water oxygen levels and leading to the death of fish and other aquatic life. River floods lead to crop damage and limit food supplies, alongside the loss of stable housing and threats to human and animal life.⁸ When examining the current evidence, it is not a stretch at all to consider the biblical forewarning: that “*you will soon perish from the good land that " is assigning to you*” if the needed rain patterns cannot be maintained.

The Role of Human Actions and Divine Partnership

⁷ The Associated Press, “Climate Change in California Is Threatening the World’s Top Almond Producer,” NPR, August 17, 2021, <https://www.npr.org/2021/08/17/1028452988/climate-change-california-drought-heat-almond-production>.

⁸ “Climate Change Indicators: Heavy Precipitation,” EPA (Environmental Protection Agency, April 2021), <https://www.epa.gov/climate-indicators/climate-change-indicators-heavy-precipitation>.

So how might we reconcile our human impact on the environment with the theological message in this passage in Deuteronomy? It is clear in this passage that it is not merely describing a natural phenomenon; it is inviting us to participate in it and help keep its balance. The biblical language for this participation is around following commandments, *mitzvot* - *"If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving " your God and serving God with all your heart and soul, (14) I will grant the rain for your land in season..."* There is an understanding that our work is what invites God to bring the much-needed rain. Moreover, we have a responsibility to teach these commandments as part of maintaining this balance in the future -

"Therefore impress these My words upon your very heart: bind them as a sign on your hand and let them serve as a symbol on your forehead, (19) and teach them to your children—reciting them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up; (20) and inscribe them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates— (21)"

The commandments are part of our lifeline to the crucial balance described in the preceding text, and their continuation for generations is essential.

Where I think the biblical and the scientific start to converge is in the understanding of what we need to do to move forward: we need to work together. Rashi points out that, unlike the first paragraph of the Shema, this section speaks these commands in the second person plural -

בְּכֹל-לְבַבְכֶם וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם... וְקִשְׁרֹתֵם אֹתָם לְאוֹת עַל-יְדֵיכֶם וְהָיוּ לְטוֹטְפוֹת בֵּין עֵינֵיכֶם: (יט) וְלִמְדֹתֵם אֹתָם אֶת-בְּנֵיכֶם⁹

This section of the Shema is instructing *all of us* - the entire community - that our survival is dependent on adhering to these instructions. In the realm of environmental science, this is absolutely true as well. It is the "tragedy of the commons" that pollutes our air and water and leads to extra greenhouse gas emissions that in turn warm our planet and contributes to disrupted rain patterns we've discussed.¹⁰ It is not one person, one organization, or one country's contributions alone that disrupt the patterns, but rather the collective sense that our individual actions might not lead to a problem, when in fact they add up to disaster.

⁹ Rashi on Deuteronomy 11:13, based on Sifrei Devarim 41:29.

¹⁰ Margaret E. Banyan, "Tragedy of the Commons," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc.), accessed April 20, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/science/tragedy-of-the-commons>.

The end of this biblical passage in fact highlights the possibility of a bleak future if we do not act - (Deuteronomy 11:21): *“to the end that you and your children may endure, in the land that I swore to your fathers to assign to them, as long as there is a heaven over the earth.”* The passage in its original context probably means “as long as there is a heaven over the earth” to say “forever;” yet, I can’t help but think of our damaged ozone layer and the harms that may come to future generations if, literally, the atmosphere is no longer adequately protecting life on earth. What was once perhaps taken for granted as “forever” should no longer be seen as an indefinite wonder of creation.

Some scientists think we are already “past the point of no return” in terms of the significant global impact of rising greenhouse gas emissions. However, there is still time to at least slow or reduce the effects of climate change for future generations. Protecting future generations to ensure that indeed “there is a heaven over the earth” would require buy-in and sacrifice from human communities across the globe. The problem wasn’t created by one person alone, and it certainly won’t be ameliorated by any one person or one group alone either. I can’t think of another task more worthy of being described as requiring *“b’khol l’vavenu uv’khol nafsh’khenu”* - all our hearts and all our souls. We must partner with God in a sense of commandedness to protect the sanctity of the balance of life on this planet.

New Insights

I no longer feel so distant from this second paragraph of the Shema. Delving deeper into the climate science embedded in this passage has given me a nudge to expand my understanding of God. I had tended to rely on reading this passage symbolically, saying “it doesn’t literally mean God is going to send awful things your way just for not following the rules,” etc. I now think, however, that there is quite a lot here that can be read much more literally if a more Kaplanian, naturalist approach to the divine is applied. What if we consider God to be the force that perpetually binds us in connection with the rest of the human and natural world? What if God is the ultimate creator of interconnectedness? What if the “One” of “Adonai Echad” means that really, truly we know that we and our neighbors, human, living creatures, and non-living elements of the natural world, are all one -

we share a destiny, and we rely on each other constantly. I believe that if we really approached life in the way that such a theology might instruct us, we would see an amelioration of these forces that are contributing to shifting rain patterns and natural destruction.

Does God literally get angry when we don't live in such a way? I'm not sure - but I know that if we pay attention to the signs that the Earth shows us we will see there is certainly an upset in that Oneness that helps maintain balance. I might still see "worshiping other gods" in a more symbolic light - the forces that draw our attention away from interconnectedness. Consumerism, capitalism, demand to take, take, take from the Earth without consideration for who and what are affected. If I consider God to be the interconnectedness of life that we all share, this second paragraph certainly fits with the central proclamation of the Shema:

Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad

Listen God-wrestlers, Adonai our God, Adonai is One!

Everything on this planet - us, plants, animals, rocks, air - you, me, the microbes we can't even see with our eyes - it is all ONE.

What if we really begin to think of ourselves not as disconnected entities, but as part of the interconnected root system that leads us back to God? Surely, if we remain deeply committed to maintaining our connection in the web of other beings and resources, great thriving for us and our neighbors (microbe to primate) awaits. And indeed, if not, if our hearts and minds remained closed to this sense of connection, it just might be that the heavens will be closed off as well.

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