



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Eikev 5772

By Rabbi David Singer

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In *Parshat Eikev*, Moses offers the Israelites one of the most moving and persuasive encouragements toward Divine service found in the entire Torah. As they stand on the edge of the Jordan, they are reminded that Divine service demands walking in the path of God:

“And now, O Israel, what does Adonai your God demand of you? Only this: to revere Adonai your God, to walk only in God’s paths, to love God, and to serve Adonai your God with all your heart and soul... Adonai your God is God supreme and Adonai supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God.”¹

After offering his command to follow this “mighty” Creator, Moses continues with a description of the specific nature of God’s power. Given the many examples of God displaying great physical might, we might expect Moses to mention the Flood, the 10 plagues on Egypt or the splitting of the sea; yet Moses ignores these feats and, instead, continues his praise by focusing on the fact that God “shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing.”² God’s awesome power, Moses explains, is displayed through love for those afflicted by injustice, those most likely to be trampled on by society at large. Rather than physical might, it is God’s concern for the afflicted that we should emulate.

This is a provocative theological message, to be sure, and one that has crucial practical import for those of us who concern ourselves with the work of global justice. So often, public discourse bifurcates between those interested in exercising power through force and those interested in offering empathic aid as a means for influencing change in the world. We often associate power with oppression, rather than with those who speak out against it. This may leave many of us in the West uncomfortable with thinking of our social justice work as exercising “power,” but by asking us to emulate a God who does so to overcome injustice, our tradition invites us to embrace our empathic force and not to be shy about using it.

Parshat Eikev pushes us to see power and empathy as intrinsically linked, rather than opposites. By exercising power—and refusing to cede it to those with less altruistic goals—we follow in God’s path, realizing our human power through *tzedakah* and political advocacy.

In fact, Rabbi Abraham, son of the Rambam, instructs us not only to realize our power but to be generous with it, using it to support those who are vulnerable. He teaches, “Proper generosity involves not only money and goods, but also power . . . Generosity with power entails using [the power] bestowed [on us] by God to help those in need . . .”³

¹ Deuteronomy 10:12-17.

² Deuteronomy 10:17-18.

³ Rabbi Abraham, son of the Rambam, *The Guide to Serving God*, Chapter 5 D2. Translation by R. Yaakov Wincelberg, edited for gender neutrality. Available at <http://on1foot.org/text/rabbi-abraham-son-rambam-guide-serving-god-chapter-5>.

The work of global justice—helping to alleviate poverty, empowering the voiceless, bringing equality to those corners of the earth still shackled in inequality—is a supremely powerful act that is directly inspired by God’s own concern for the oppressed.

As we strive to serve God, we would be well-served to emulate the Holy One’s great qualities of awesome might coupled with empathy for those afflicted by injustice. We have a convenient reminder to do so thrice daily, as Moses’s iconic description of the Holy One in this *parashah* as “great, mighty and awesome” is repeated at the beginning of the Amidah—the central petitionary prayer of Jewish worship. In beseeching our Creator for blessing in this world, let us not only focus on God’s physical might but on God’s empathic power, and remind ourselves that upholding the cause of those forgotten around the world is an act of emulating and employing this awesome Divine attribute. This is how we serve our Creator. This, Moses teaches, is what God demands of us.



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