DISCUSSION GUIDE

Eikev

Small Actions, Big Impacts

Traditionally, a Torah portion is named after one of the first words it contains, but this formulaic origin does not mean that deep meaning cannot be found in that name. In the case of this week's portion, Eikev, the first word may at first seem insignificant. Eikev is typically translated as "because" or "if," a small grammatical hinge linking the performance of God's commands to the bestowal of God's favor.

דברים ז:יב-יג (יב) וְהָיָה ׀ עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֵת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ אֶת־הַבְּרִית וְאֶת־הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ׃ (יג) וַאֲהֵבְךָ וּבֵרַכְךָ וְהִרְבֶּךָ וּבֵרַךְ פְּרִי־בִטְנְךָ וּפְרִי־אַדְמָתֶךָ דְּגָנְךָ וְתִירֹשְׁךָ וְיִצְהָרֶךָ שְׁגַר־אֲלָפֶיךָ וְעַשְׁתְּרֹת צֹאנֶךָ עַל הָאֲדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ לָתֶת לָךְ׃	**Deuteronomy 7:12-13** (12) And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, the Lord your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant and kindness made with your fathers: (13) [God] will favor you and bless you and multiply you—blessing your issue from the womb and your produce from the soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock, in the land sworn to your fathers to be assigned to you.

Yet Rashi, an influential medieval Torah and Talmud commentator, draws on *eikev*'s additional meaning, heel, to find deeper meaning in this seemingly innocuous word:

רש"י על דברים ז:יב **והיה עקב תשמעון.** אִם הַמִּצְוֹות קַלּוֹת שֶׁאָדָם דָּשׁ בַּעֲקֵבָיו תשמעון.	**Rashi on Deuteronomy 7:12** ***Vehaya eikev tishme'un***: If you listen to even the lighter commands which a person usually treads on with his heels (i.e., which a person is inclined to treat lightly).

- **Why do you think the Torah offers a special reward for one who observes mitzvot that are easy to overlook?**
- **Can you think of any small good deeds that people often overlook?**

A similar idea to that presented by Rashi can be found in a mishnah from Tractate Pirkei Avot. The Mishnah was the first major work of rabbinic literature. Pirkei Avot is a unique tractate, in that it consists solely of wisdom and ethics of the rabbinic sages. This teaching

is from the compiler of the Mishnah, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, who was sometimes simply known as “Rabbi.”

משנה אבות ב:א	**Pirkei Avot 2:1**
רַבִּי אוֹמֵר... וֶהֱוֵי זָהִיר בְּמִצְוָה קַלָּה כְּבַחֲמוּרָה, שֶׁאֵין אַתָּה יוֹדֵעַ מַתַּן שְׂכָרָן שֶׁל מִצְוֹת.	Rabbi said.. be careful with a light commandment as with a grave one, for you do not know the reward for the fulfillment of the commandments.

- **Both Rashi and Rabbi talk about the importance of keeping “light” commandments. According to each source, why should we be careful even with light commandments? Which explanation resonates with you most, and why?**

Traditional Jewish practice includes many such “small acts” – daily ritual commandments that may seem less important than larger moments of inspiration. But Rabbi Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, cautions against that attitude.

Studies in Spirituality: A Weekly Reading of the Jewish Bible, Parshat Tetzaveh, “Inspiration and Perspiration”

Judaism’s greatness is that it takes high ideals and exalted visions – image of God, faith in God, love of neighbour – and turns them into patterns of behaviour. Halakha (Jewish law) involves a set of routines that – like those of the great creative minds – reconfigures the brain, giving discipline to our lives and changing the way we feel, think, and act. Much of Judaism must seem to outsiders, and sometimes to insiders also, boring, prosaic, mundane, repetitive, routine, obsessed with details, and bereft for the most part of drama or inspiration…We have developed in the West a strange view of religious experience: that it’s what overwhelms you when something happens completely outside the run of normal experience. You climb a mountain and look down. You are miraculously saved from danger. You find yourself part of a vast and cheering crowd... We have all had such experiences. But that is all they are: experiences. They linger in the memory, but they are not part of everyday life. They are not woven into the texture of our character. They do not affect what we do or achieve or become. Judaism is about changing us so that we become creative artists whose greatest creation is our own life.

- **What do you think Rabbi Sacks means when he says that Judaism wants us to “become creative artists whose greatest creation is our own life?”**
- **Rabbi Sacks writes that “we have all had” moments of powerful religious**

feeling. Have you had such an experience? If so, what was it? If not, do you hope to?

Turning back to our portion, we find an example of a routine Rabbi Sacks credits with "giving discipline to our lives and changing the way we feel, think, and act." The Talmud derives the obligation of Grace after Meals, in Hebrew "Birkat HaMazon," from from this verse:

דברים ח:י וְאָכַלְתָּ֖ וְשָׂבָ֑עְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ֙ אֶת־יְהוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֔יךָ עַל־הָאָ֥רֶץ הַטֹּבָ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֥ר נָתַן־לָֽךְ׃	**Deuteronomy 8:10** When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to the Lord your God for the good land given to you.

- **Why might the verse specify that one should give thanks only after having "eaten your fill"? Wouldn't any amount of food still necessitate gratitude?**
- **Other than after eating, what is another time in your daily routine you think offering gratitude (whether to God or another person) is particularly appropriate?**

While this verse speaks only about gratitude after eating a good meal, the same principle can be applied far more broadly: it is important to cultivate the practice of gratitude. Rabbeinu Asher, a prominent medieval Talmudic commentator and legal decisor known as the Rosh, recommends an expansive attitude of gratitude in one's daily life:

אורחות חיים להרא"ש ו:כז אַל תְּהִי כְּפוּי טוֹבָה, וְכַבֵּד כָּל מִי שֶׁפָּתַח לְךָ פֶּתַח לְבַקֵּשׁ דֵּי סְפוּקְךָ׃	**Orchot Chaim LeHaRosh 6:27** Do not be oblivious to the good that others do for you. Acknowledge even those who do something as simple as opening a door for you, which you surely could have done on your own.

- **Why do you think the Rosh specifies that you should be grateful even for actions you could have done by yourself?**
- **How does the way we express gratitude make a difference? Can you think of someone who expressed gratitude in a particularly memorable way?**

Further Questions for Discussion

1. Rabbi Sacks writes that "Halakha (Jewish law) involves a set of routines that – like those of the great creative minds – reconfigures the brain, giving discipline to our lives and changing the way we feel, think, and act." In this sheet, we explored Birkat HaMazon, and the general practice of gratitude, as examples of such

routines. How might incorporating more gratitude into your life might impact the way you feel, think, and act?
2. In Hebrew, gratitude is often translated as *hakarat hatov*, meaning “recognizing the good.” How might "recognizing the good" be a bit different from the English word "gratitude?
3. After learning these sources, what is one idea that will stick with you, and what is one question that you are left with?

Suggestions for Further Study

For a roundup of interesting ideas about Parshat Eikev, you can see the Simchat Torah Challenge’s materials here.

For more sources on Eikev, check out Sefaria’s Eikev topic page, which houses a wide variety of sources. You may also be interested in looking at Sefaria’s topic pages on Birkat HaMazon, Thanks, and Gratitude.

In this sheet, we focused on Rashi’s interpretation of the portion’s first verse, but there are many other approaches taken by different commentators. If you are interested in exploring these, you can find more commentaries on Sefaria, many of which are translated into English, at this link.

If you would like to learn more of Pirkei Avot, you may be interested in Sefaria’s experimental AI-powered Pirkei Avot learning guide, which provides interactive questions for each section of the text.

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