Eikev: Devarim (Deuteronomy)

What's it all about?

Moses promises the Israelites that if they keep God's commandments, they'll thrive in the land God had promised to their forefathers. He also reminds them of their previous sins, including the golden calf, Korach's rebellion, and the sin of the spies, **but reassures them that God forgives.**



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Moses describes the Promised Land as "flowing with milk and honey," and commands them to destroy the idols erected by the land's previous inhabitants. The second chapter of the Shema is also repeated.

"If you will heed these ordinances and safeguard them by studying how to perform them, and perform them, God, your God, will keep the covenant for you, as well as the kindness that He swore to your forefathers."

Take a deeper dive

How do you keep a society functional, free, and thriving? These days, with politics and culture so chaotic everywhere, the question seems more urgent than ever. This week's parsha, thankfully, delivers a searing answer.

The real challenge societies face, Moses instructs the Israelites, doesn't come when they're struggling with real hardships, like wandering in the desert for 40 years or fighting for survival against genocidal foes. The real challenge comes much later, when security is guaranteed and food is plentiful and no one's lacking for much; because **the real challenge is always spiritual, not physical.**

The great philosopher Bertrand Russell described this condition in his seminal *History of Western Philosophy*. "What had happened in the great age of Greece happened again in Renaissance Italy," he wrote. "Traditional moral restraints disappeared, because they were seen to be associated with superstition; the liberation from fetters made individuals energetic and creative, producing a rare fluorescence of genius; but the anarchy and treachery which inevitably resulted from the decay of morals made Italians collectively impotent, and they fell, like the Greeks, under the domination of nations less civilized than themselves but not so destitute of social cohesion."

This same cycle, the late Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks explained, eventually befalls each and every civilization, but should it happen to the Israelites, a small and struggling nation, it would be disastrous. "Only against this background," Rabbi Sacks explained, "can we understand the momentous project the book of Devarim is proposing: the creation of a society capable of defeating the normal laws of the growth-and-decline of civilizations. This is an astonishing idea."

But how to do so? This week's parsha, Rabbi Sacks wrote, gives us three crucial rules to safeguarding our civilization from collapse, all of them captured in Moses's powerful speech. First, we must never forget where we came from. Second, we must never drift far from our foundational principles and ideas, which, for us Jews, means faith in God and adherence to His commandments. And finally, we must realize that society is only as strong as its faith. "Only faith in God," Rabbi Sacks noted, "can lead us to honor the needs of others as well as ourselves. **Only faith in God can motivate us to act for the benefit of a future we will not live to see.** Only faith in God can stop us from wrongdoing when we believe that no other human will ever find out. Only faith in God can give us the humility that alone has the power to defeat the arrogance of success and the self-belief that leads…to military overstretch and national defeat."

The Israelites, Moses knew, would soon forget all this, grow over-confident, forget their tradition, and sin. But they—us—will then come back, back to first principles, back to a civilization that can't be beat.

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