

Eikev

Over the past few years, I've read a lot of children's books. This morning, I'd like to talk about one of my favorites. And yes, there will be spoilers.

In the book, The Rabbit Listened, by Cori Doerrfeld, Taylor builds a special tower that comes crashing down, seemingly out of nowhere. One by one, animals come and go, trying to help. The chicken wants Taylor to talk about it. The elephant wants to fix the tower, the snake suggests knocking down someone else's tower, and so on. But nothing works until the rabbit shows up. And I'm sure you can guess what the rabbit does. After all, the book is called, The Rabbit Listened.

I believe that this children's book is really for adults. How easy is it for us to instruct our young people – or even one another – on how to solve whatever we think their problems are. It's much harder, and much more time consuming, to listen.

As a parent, I have learned that the least helpful response to mishaps is pointing out why something went wrong.

Imagine Taylor's father saying, "Of course your tower fell, I told you it needed a stronger base." Now as an adult, I don't like this approach. A purely theoretical example: if, while driving in heavy traffic, I find myself stuck in the middle of an intersection when the light turns red, I definitely don't need a stranger honking at me, in order for me to realize that I should have stopped at the light.

Employing these "I-told-you-so"s is incredibly tempting, especially with young people. But as it turns out, many kids, like us, don't appreciate this technique either.

The metaphor of God as a parent has always resonated with me. But I have to admit that I am deeply troubled by God's victim-blaming attitude, in Parshat Eikev, in Parshat Eikev, the book of Deuteronomy as a whole, and beyond. At the very least, I cannot believe that this is God, at God's best.

For a long time, I have struggled with the second paragraph of the Shema, which comes from our parasha:

"If you obey the commandments," the Torah says,

וְנָתַתִּי מִטְר־אֲרָצְכֶם בְּעֵתוֹ

"I will grant the rain for your land at its proper time. I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle.

You will eat and be satisfied.”¹

This text is not unique in the Torah in depicting a system of rewards. Yet, I find it difficult to recite these words on a regular basis. It’s hard to see pictures of devastating flooding in eastern Kentucky, to read about wildfires blazing in Europe, and then come to shul and confront these words in our siddur. According to the World Bank this week, “record high food prices have triggered a global crisis that will drive millions more into extreme poverty, magnifying hunger and malnutrition.”² I certainly do not believe that these are punishments from an angry God.

This theology of Divine Retribution is pervasive in the Torah, and our rabbinic tradition offers us several options to contend with the challenging nature of these biblical passages. Perhaps true reward and punishment occurs only in the World to Come. Maybe people are only disciplined as a collective, rather than based on their individual behavior.

Each of these approaches has its own set of issues and questions, which we can leave for another time. I’d even argue that when we get caught in the weeds of asking why bad things happen to good people, we risk missing a critical piece of the puzzle. The theology of Divine Retribution, while difficult to stomach, does have something important to teach us.

If we reject the notion that we are to blame for all of our misfortunes, we must also recognize the flipside: we can’t take full credit for our accomplishments, either. In addition to not blaming the victim, we need to acknowledge the forces beyond our control that contribute to our success, be they privilege, luck or anything else.

A midrash on the verses we have been exploring, discusses the difference between people and animals. When an animal – such as an ox – eats its fill, it does its best work plowing its owners’ fields, thus increasing produce. But humans are different. When we are completely satisfied, it’s a recipe for trouble. This midrash argues that we rebel against God only when we are sated.³

I don’t think this midrash is denying the importance of self-care. Not unlike oxen, we too, need certain basics in order to learn, grow and be productive members of our families, communities and society as a whole. Rather, this midrash highlights the risk of complacency. When we become too comfortable, we can begin to take our circumstances for granted. This is one of the most important messages of our parasha.

¹ Deuteronomy 11:14-15

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/agriculture/brief/food-security-update>

³ Sifrei Devarim 43

Along these lines, if we think about what is at stake – what God fears – it’s idolatry. When we fall into the trap of taking full credit for our achievements, it’s akin to worshipping idols.

How can we avoid becoming idolaters? Parshat Eikev has an answer for that as well. Earlier in the parasha, the Torah asks the question, “What does God demand of you?”

מִמָּה יִתְּנָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ שְׂאֵל מֵעַמֶּיךָ

The Torah’s answer to this question is poetic and inspiring. But I want to highlight one particular aspect of the Torah’s answer:

God upholds the cause of the orphan and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.⁴

In these verses, God demands action – partnership, really. We must acknowledge the circumstances beyond our control that contribute to our accomplishments. Expressing gratitude is essential but not sufficient. It is crucial that we also take God’s charge seriously to become active partners in lifting up those who aren’t as fortunate.

Our partnership with God also entails taking responsibility for what is within our control, both individually and collectively, and adjusting our behavior as needed. Sometimes, there is a proven cause and effect, and we can do something to improve the world around us. As Jews, we are obligated to do what we can.

A Talmudic story⁵ addresses some of these themes: There was a drought, and Rav declared a fast day, as was customary, to bring rain. But it did not rain. A certain prayer leader was more successful. When the Hazzan prayed for wind and rain, saying “mashiv haruach umorid hagashem,” the wind began to blow, and the rain finally came. Perplexed, Rav asked the prayer leader about himself. The Hazzan responded, “I am a teacher of children, and I teach Tanakh to the children of the poor alongside the children of the rich. And if there is anyone who cannot pay, I do not take anything from them. I also have a fishpond, and for any child who neglects their studies, I bribe them with the fish to calm them and soothe them until they are ready to learn.

Dena Weiss, Rosh Beit Midrash and Senior Faculty at Hadar, has a gorgeous, thought-provoking interpretation of this Talmudic tale. She writes, “God is trying to get us to behave, to pay attention...by threatening us, by bringing drought and bringing us desperately to our knees. But the kind teacher provides a different model, showing that

⁴ Deuteronomy 10:18-19

⁵ Taanit 24a

you can induce better behavior through kindness. [The teacher] demonstrates that you can inspire a student to learn out of affection and a desire to please, rather than from fear of punishment. God is moved—perhaps even taught—by this great teacher, to shift...from manipulating through threats, to encouraging, with love.”

Weiss’ take is empowering. Perhaps, as God’s partners, we can play a role in discouraging God’s punitive strategies. And in emulating God’s acts of chesed, God’s kindness, we can remind ourselves to encourage with love and listening, rather than by force or I-told-you-so’s.

Entering the Hebrew month of Elul and the High Holidays is a perfect occasion to ask ourselves the question from our parasha: What does God ask of me, and of us?

Some of the most poignant liturgy in our Machzor is about listening. At the end of the Hineni prayer and in Shema Koleinu, we beg for God’s listening presence. Leading up to the holiday season, I yearn to feel the presence of community and closeness to God. I also crave quiet and stillness so I can connect with myself to do the internal work of cheshbon hanefesh – checking in with myself.

In our loud and chaotic world, I really can relate to Taylor from the book, The Rabbit Listened. There’s a lot of information constantly flying at us, influencing the way we think, and distracting us from our inner monologue, taking us away from our own sense of what we need and what we believe.

At the end of the book, Taylor and the rabbit sit in silence until Taylor finally says, “please stay with me.” Although it’s a bit of a silly comparison, this is a theology I can relate to. Maybe God is like the rabbit, and we just need to be heard out. But I also believe that we are like the rabbit, and that God needs us, too.

Shabbat Shalom,
Cantor, Rabbi Shoshi Levin Goldberg