

Eikev: The Heel of Redemption

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On the twelfth day of Av 5786 the daily study cycle presents a remarkably coherent set of texts that address the formation of the individual soul, the moral structure of the collective, and the conditions under which a people may endure in prosperity without losing its covenantal orientation. The first portion of Parshat Eikev (Devarim 7:12–8:10) begins with the conditional formula “And it shall be, because (*eikev*) you will hearken to these ordinances and keep and do them, that the Lord your G-d will keep with you the covenant and the kindness which He swore to your fathers.” The unusual choice of the word *eikev*—literally “heel”—has drawn the attention of classical commentators from the earliest midrashic collections onward. Rashi, drawing on the Sifrei, explains that the term refers to the light commandments that a person is liable to trample underfoot, those everyday acts of fidelity that attract neither public notice nor dramatic reward yet upon which the entire structure of blessing rests.

The portion continues with an enumeration of material and familial blessings—fruit of the womb, fruit of the soil, increase of cattle and flocks—followed by the command to remember the great trials, signs, and outstretched arm with which G-d redeemed Israel from Egypt. At the center stands the pedagogical drama of the manna: “He afflicted you and suffered you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord” (8:3). The section closes with the explicit warning against the arrogance that prosperity can generate: “lest you say in your heart, My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth” (8:17), and the corresponding call to bless G-d after eating and being satisfied.

Tehillim 66–68 supply a complementary register. Chapter 66 speaks of testing as silver is refined and of the community’s passage through fire and water into a place of abundance. Chapter 67 articulates a vision in which the knowledge of G-d’s ways among the nations leads to the blessing of the earth. Chapter 68, the great processional psalm, moves from the trembling of Sinai to the ascent with captives and the bestowal of strength upon the people. Together these psalms frame the particular covenant of Israel as both a refining discipline and a light that can illuminate the nations.

The conclusion of Tanya, Iggeret HaKodesh, Epistle 4, turns the analysis both inward and outward. Israel, the Alter Rebbe teaches, is redeemed only through *tzedakah*. The innermost point of the heart—the *pnimiyut* that lies beyond ordinary *da’at*—must be redeemed from its exile within the *kelipot*. This redemption is accomplished through acts of giving that draw upon one’s own vital substance, especially when directed toward the Land of Israel. Such giving arouses the Supernal Countenance and prepares the unexpected coming of Mashiach. Parallel to this inner work, Rambam’s three chapters of *Pesulei HaMukdashim* (17–19) insist that the sacred service of the Temple admits no flaw. Defective intention, improper procedure, impurity of person or vessel, or the slightest deviation from the prescribed order disqualifies the offering. The demand for absolute integrity in the holiest service serves as an analogue for integrity in every domain of public and private life.

Finally, the Hayom Yom entry for 12 Av crystallizes the entire complex in a single luminous teaching transmitted from the Baal Shem Tov through the Maggid of Mezritch to the Alter Rebbe: “‘Love your fellow like yourself’ is an interpretation of and commentary on ‘Love Hashem your G-d.’ He who loves his fellow-Jew loves G-d, because the Jew has within himself a ‘part of G-d Above.’ Therefore, when one loves the Jew—that is, his inner essence—one loves G-d.”

These texts are not a random assemblage. They form a single pedagogical matrix that addresses character formation, public morality, the dangers of prosperity, the necessity of memory, the mystical equality of souls, and the institutional requirements of a covenanted polity. The historical events associated with the date reinforce the same themes: the forced disputation of Nachmanides in Barcelona in 1263, an uncompromising defense of Torah under royal pressure that ultimately led him to Jerusalem to rebuild its diminished community, and the acquisition of 770 Eastern Parkway on this day in 1940 as a center of Torah study, leadership, and institutional continuity in a time of extreme exile and destruction.

I. The Meaning of Eikev: The Heel as the Site of Ordinary Fidelity

The word *eikev* appears at the beginning of the portion with deliberate force. Classical interpretation, beginning with the Sifrei and Rashi, understands it as a reference to those commandments that people tend to regard as of secondary importance and therefore to trample under the heel. The blessings of the covenant are made contingent precisely upon attention to these neglected acts. Later commentators expand the idea in multiple directions. Some emphasize the temporal dimension: the “heel” of the year or of the day, the moments when energy is low and the temptation to cut corners is high. Others stress the hierarchical dimension: the commandments that stand at the bottom of conventional rankings of importance. Still others, particularly in Chassidic literature, connect the heel to the *ikveta d'Meshicha*, the heel of the messianic process itself, the final and most difficult stage of history in which the ordinary and the overlooked become the decisive agents of redemption.

This teaching stands in productive tension with any spirituality that privileges dramatic religious experience or public displays of piety. It also challenges any political theory that locates the health of the republic solely in large institutional designs or in the actions of heroic founders and leaders. The Torah's claim is more radical: the endurance of the covenant depends upon the cumulative weight of small, repeated acts of fidelity performed when no one is watching. The heel is both the lowest point of the body and the point of contact with the ground; it is the place where the person meets the world in the most ordinary way. Precisely there, the text insists, the covenant is kept or broken.

II. The Manna as Pedagogical Instrument: Dependence, Memory, and the Danger of Prosperity

The central drama of the portion is the manna. G-d afflicted the people with hunger and then fed them with a food they had never known, “that He might make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord.” The manna is not merely a miracle of provision; it is a prolonged educational regimen lasting forty years. Its purpose is to form a consciousness of dependence upon the divine word rather than upon human agricultural or economic power.

When the people enter a land of wheat, barley, vines, figs, pomegranates, oil-producing olives, and honey, the danger is that the very success of the land will erase the memory of the wilderness. The text therefore places the warning against self-attribution of wealth immediately after the description of abundance. The command to bless G-d after eating and being satisfied (the source of the later institution of Birkat HaMazon) is the practical mechanism by which memory is to be preserved in the midst of plenty.

This teaching has direct implications for any theory of political economy or civic virtue. Classical republican thought, from Aristotle onward, recognized that wealth and leisure can corrupt character and that the cultivation of virtue requires deliberate institutional and educational effort. Modern liberal thought has often been more optimistic about the moral effects of prosperity. The Torah's position is closer to the classical republican insight, yet it grounds that insight in a theological anthropology: the human being is constituted in relation to a transcendent source, and forgetfulness of that relation is the root of both personal arrogance and public corruption.

III. Ahavas Yisrael as the Interpretation of Ahavas Hashem

The Hayom Yom teaching for the day elevates *ahavas Yisrael* from a horizontal ethical duty to a vertical theological reality. To love the fellow Jew is not merely a commandment parallel to the love of G-d; it is the practical interpretation and commentary upon that love. The reason is ontological: every Jew contains a portion of G-d above. Therefore, to love the inner essence of the other is to love G-d.

This teaching finds its fullest development in Tanya Chapter 32, where the Alter Rebbe explains that the commandment of *ahavas Yisrael* becomes accessible when one regards the body as secondary and the divine soul as primary. All souls are equal in their root; they all have one Father. Only the bodies are distinct. When this perspective is internalized, love of the other becomes natural rather than forced.

The political implications are far-reaching. Classical republicanism prized civic friendship (*philia*) as a necessary bond of the *polis*. Modern theories of non-domination and civic virtue continue to search for the affective and ethical foundations of a free political order. The Chassidic claim is that the deepest foundation of such friendship is the recognition of a shared divine origin. Secular republicanism can approximate the horizontal effects of this teaching, but it cannot supply the ontological ground. Without that ground, civic friendship remains vulnerable to the fluctuations of interest, identity, and power.

IV. Integrity in Sacred Service and Public Life: The Rambam's Demand

Rambam's chapters on disqualified offerings insist that the Temple service admits no compromise. Intention, procedure, purity, and timing must all be correct; the slightest deviation invalidates the offering. This demand for absolute integrity in the holiest domain serves as a model for integrity in every domain. Public office, the marketplace, the institutions of learning and judgment—all are subject to the same principle: the smallest breach of integrity compromises the whole.

In republican terms, this is the insistence that character matters and that institutional design alone cannot compensate for the absence of virtue in officeholders and citizens. The Torah's version of this insight is more stringent because it grounds the demand for integrity in the holiness of the service itself rather than in utilitarian considerations of public trust or efficiency.

V. Synchronizing Orthodox Jewish Theology with Republican Political Theory

The Torah presents a polity that can be described as a mixed constitution under higher law. A written constitution (the Torah) stands above any human ruler. Education in the law is universal so that every citizen can participate in the covenantal order. Institutional checks limit the exaltation of any single heart. The common good is pursued through *chesed* and *tzedek*. Blessings flow to the collective when the covenant is observed.

Daniel J. Elazar's work on covenant and polity demonstrates that biblical Israel functioned as a classic federal republic or commonwealth grounded in consent and higher law. Deuteronomy itself operates as a constitutional restatement. Eric Nelson's *The Hebrew Republic* shows how early modern Christian Hebraists recovered biblical and rabbinic sources to argue for republican exclusivism and limited power. Yoram Hazony recovers the biblical middle path of the limited nation-state under covenant against both empire and anarchy. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks emphasizes the politics of memory and the covenant of love that integrates justice with relational fidelity.

Secular classical and neo-republicanism offer valuable conceptual tools—civic virtue, non-domination, mixed constitution, the formative role of education and ritual—yet remain incomplete without the recognition that every person bears a portion of the divine. Pure contractarian liberalism protects rights effectively but struggles to generate thick shared narrative and loyalty. Progressive Jewish readings that prioritize universal ethics while downplaying the particular covenant risk emptying the vessel through which universal blessing is meant to flow. Strict theocratic readings may under-emphasize the popular participation and mixed institutional elements already present in the Torah's design. Chassidic thought supplies the decisive elevation: *ahavas Yisrael* becomes the practical expression of *ahavas Hashem*, dissolving ego and uniting the republic of souls.

The resulting synthesis—covenantal republicanism—perfects human republican ideals by rooting liberty in service of G-d, equality in the shared possession of the divine spark, and justice in the commandments given at Sinai.

Conclusion

The daily portions of 12 Av 5786 present a unified teaching: the heel of ordinary observance is the heel of redemption. Small, consistent acts of fidelity; active memory of dependence upon the divine word; the redemption of the heart's innermost point through giving; and love that recognizes the portion of G-d in every Jew—these constitute the living substance of both personal formation and public order. The covenant endures, and the horizon of complete redemption remains open.

Extended Bibliography

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