

D'var Eikev 7 August 2020

- Getting lost in the BWCAW:
 - All our gear into a very thin-skinned canoe
 - Wobbly
 - Wilderness is vast
 - No signs, everything is beautiful, but it all looks the same. Easy to get lost.
 - Feeling small, vulnerable, and utterly in awe
- This week's parasha, Eikev, has one of my least favorite passage in the Jewish canon.
- וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מִהַ יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ שְׂאֵל מֵעַמּוּךָ כִּי אִם-לִירְאָה אֶת-יְהוָה לֵלְכֹת בְּכָל-דַּרְכָיו וְלֹאֲהַבָּה אֹתוֹ וְלַעֲבֹד אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּכָל-לִבְבְּךָ וּבְכָל-נַפְשְׁךָ:
 - “And now, Israel, what does God ask of you? Only this: to fear (*yirah*) your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve YHVH your God with all your heart and soul,”
- The word I want to focus on is *yirah*
 - Translated usually as ‘fear’, but also as being filled with awe
 - Two things to unpack:
 - (1) *Yirah* as fear vs. awe;
 - (2) how does *yirah* further our spiritual development?
- Why do I dislike this passage?
 - I’m not ok with the idea of fearing God
- Partly that’s because of my experience of God, which is not an experience of a god with agency, who acts to direct my life, punish me, etc.
- But also because fear itself is an emotion that is fraught
 - The vast majority of our unwise decisions arise from fear.
 - Anger, greed and excessive consumption, discrimination.
 - Election: people vote for anti-immigrant parties but haven’t been personally affected by immigrants
- Fearing God: no good comes of that.
 - Wrathful god: Kraukauer’s Under the Banner of Heaven
- Another translation of *yirah* is “awe”.
 - Spend a little time here because this is a way forward
 - **awe** is something that psychologists and neuroscientists study, exploring its various dimensions
 - consists of two common features:
 - a perception of vastness, which is the sense that one has encountered something immense in size or complexity;
 - the need for accommodation, which is the process by which a person revises their world view to account for the deviation between the awesome thing and one’s current understanding of the world

- **awe** alters the concept of the self by shifting attention away from the self toward vast stimuli.
 - The experience of **awe** diminishes self-focused attention and increases feelings of being small or insignificant.
 - This research suggests that the sense of a smaller self is an important psychological process of **awe**
- Overemphasis on the narrative of the self is consistently associated with psychiatric disorders such as depression and anxiety.
 - But even for people without a diagnosis, overemphasis of the self and ego is associated with diminished sense of well-being
 - In chasidut, *bitul ha'yesh*, diminishing the sense of self, tamping down the ego, is a prerequisite for getting close to God
 - So, *yirah* can refer to experiencing awe, and especially experiencing God with a sense of awe, or associating the sense of awe with God.
 - Where does that get us?
 - Already alluded to the spiritual power of diminishing the sense of self. Where does that take us? One answer is in the subsequent p'sukim.
 - A few p'sukim later – the text first enjoins us to open our hearts and relax a little, in a quintessentially Jewish way:
 - וּמִלֶּתֶם אֶת עַרְלַת לְבַבְכֶם וְעֲרֹפְכֶם לֹא תִקְשׂוּ עוֹד:
 - “Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more.”
 - And then expands on the idea of love to include the stranger, the Other:
 - וְאַהֲבַתֶּם אֶת־הַגֵּר כִּי־גֵרִים הֵייתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם:
 - “You will love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”
 - Intimate connection, connection of intimacy, between the recognition of the awesome vastness of the Divine, the opening of the heart, and acceptance and nurturing of the Other.
 - I want to share a teaching from the S'fat Emet that I studied with my teach Elie Holzer:
 - Every person has within a connection and closeness to the KBH – refers to it variously as an inner point, *n'kudah p'nimiyut*, or a hidden inner light, or *haganuz*.
 - But life, *gashmiyut*, gets in the way.
 - *Yirah* opens us, opens the inner-ness, the inwardness.
 - And that opening leads to love and connection.
 - Interview with John Lewis:
 - pilgrimage of congresspeople through Alabama in 2013.
 - He talked about MLK, and his emphasis on love.

- “Love the hell out of them.”
 - MLK: after church bombing “don’t give up on white brothers.”
 - He talked about how Everyone has love inside, and only love can draw it out. Before the freedom rides and the marches they trained, and learned to look their assailants in the eye. He said
 - “You have to be taught the way of peace, the way of love, the way of nonviolence. And in the religious sense, in the moral sense, you can say in the bosom of every human being, there is a spark of the divine. So you don’t have a right as a human to abuse that spark of the divine in your fellow human being. If you see someone attacking you, beating you, spitting on you, years ago that person was an innocent child, innocent little baby. And so what happened? Something go wrong? Did the environment? Did someone teach that person to hate, to abuse others? So you try to appeal to the goodness of every human being and you don’t give up. You never give up on anyone.”
 - That interview was title “Love in Action”, and that was his guiding principle.
- The Sefat Emet takes this teaching and makes it about action as well.
- In his *d’rasha* wants to connect *avodah*, religious practice, in the form of the *mitzvah* of *t’fillin*, with *eidut*, bearing witness to the awesomeness of the Divine
 - Religious practice – *tefillin*. Head and heart.
 - ומלתם את ערלת לבבכם וּפְרִפּוֹם לֹא תִקְשׁוּ עוֹד :
 - “Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more.”
 - The essence of awareness, of *da’at*, of the Creator is in the mind and in the heart.
 - This is the basis for the *mitzvah* of *tefillin* – on the arm pointed at the heart, and on the head.
 - By the power of this *mitzvah* the heart and mind are open to the experience of the Divine, but it doesn’t end with experience:
 - Opening to the Divine through practice leads to *eidut*, enables us to become witnesses for the KBH.
 - *Da’at*: awareness that is active, that is in relationship
- Witnessing, *eidut*, involves mindfulness, consciousness.
 - SE: In a moment of *eidut*, person encounters or experiences or makes happen an openness that is one in the same as *n’shama*, the soul, and as the *n’kudah p’nimiyut*, the hidden inner point, the Divine spark that John Lewis spoke of so beautifulu
- Through practice we cultivate awareness, but simultaneously we need to be ready to be surprised, to experience awe.
- Closing blessing