

Eikev 5778

In the last couple of weeks I've found myself thinking a lot about the human body. Studying Talmud with some of you, we encountered a passage in *M'sechta Brachot* that ascribes dispositional functions to various organs. Last Sunday evening Matt Banks and I were talking about how different genres of dance are grounded in different parts of the feet and legs. Over the past week, a few different people shared news of medical scans and treatments of different parts of their bodies. I also got a new bicycle and checked out some local gyms, which forced questions of how my own body works and what it needs.

Today's parashah, Eikev, begins, literally, with a heel--the back part of a foot (Dev. 7:12):

"...וְהָיָה | עֶקֶב תִּשְׁמָע יוֹן אֶת הַמְּשָׁפְטִים הָאֵלֶּה..."

Translating that verse literally is impossible, but the closest to a literal translation would be "It will be, on the heels of your hearing and obeying these ordinances..."

So let's think about heels for a moment as an entre to some musings on Judaism's regard for the human body. The reader of Hebrew will recognize the root, *Ayin-Kaf-Vet*, from the name of *Ya'akov* (Jacob), our patriarch. Yaakov enters the world grasping his brother's heel and must learn over the course of his lifetime how not to be a heel in the figurative sense; he must learn how not to supplant others for his own aggrandizement.

The root of the word "*Eikev*" appears in a variety of literary settings, in all three parts of our *Tanakh*. The root first appears at the beginning of our Torah, in the third chapter of *B'reishit*. When God curses the snake for seducing Eve into eating the forbidden fruit, God says, "Man's heel will crush your head, and you will bite his heel" (Gen. 3:15). Rabbinic tradition links the snake with Satan (*Zohar on Parashat P'kudei*; and *Mishnah Bava Kamma*), and reading the verse from that perspective yields two messages about our heels: One, that we are to use our heels to not only to crush the head of a real viper, but more importantly, to crush the lure of evil; and, Two, that the heel is a place where venom may yet enter our bodies. Metaphorically, of course, the religious message is that badness can enter and creep up within our very bodies just by our walking around in the world.

Indeed, the root for “heel” holds a range of meanings and nuances based on its context, even without reading rabbinic tradition into it. It can mean “footprint,” “mark,” or “sign.” It can also be used to connote an instrument of attack, and it can mean “to attack from behind,” “to circumvent,” and “to overreach.” Additionally, the root can describe the members at the rear of a troop of people, and it can describe following after others, both literally and figuratively, in a neutral sense or with a negative connotation. It can mean to punish, to reward, to hold back, to investigate, or to be insidious. One small body part, so many associated meanings! Imagine how we might walk differently in the world--both literally and figuratively--if we were to maintain awareness and intention regarding all of the possible outcomes inherent in every step we take! And imagine how each day might be different if we gave each body part that much attention.

I doubt that many of us pay that much heed to each of our body parts all the time; it’s probably impossible. I also doubt that I am the only one in this room who tends to err in the other direction. When I am absorbed in studying or writing, normal times for eating, sleeping, and exercising can go by without my noticing. Yet when I come back to earth, I remember that human life--my life, your life--abounds in the gifts our bodies offer us every moment that we are alive. When one part of our body malfunctions, we naturally focus on the problem rather than being amazed at how many parts of our bodies function well most of the time.

Our ancestors saw each part of the body as ripe with potential for good or evil. For example, they teach that the mouth can produce words of praise, wisdom, or tenderness but can also produce slander, insult, and filth. The palate can crave the taste of permitted forbidden foods or forbidden foods. Hands can open to the needy or tamper with another’s property. Feet can lead us to sacred places or immoral places. Many of our ancient texts, both biblical and rabbinic, use the language of the body, rather than the language of spiritual capacity, affective disposition, or emotional inclination, to identify human behaviors that bear moral and spiritual consequences.

Reading the rewards for observance offered in today’s *parashah*, one finds that they concern physical health and endurance. There is no mention of eternal life or any spiritual reward, other than general statements that God will love and bless the nation, which precede descriptions of physical

blessing. So long as they adhere to the *mitzvot*, God will bring the rains in their season, the Israelites will harvest abundant crops, and they will be physically strong and well.

Daniel Boyarin, in his book *Carnal Israel*, asserts that rabbinic Judaism in antiquity invested fundamental significance in the body, which other ancient sects, including early Christians, reserves for the soul. He writes, “for rabbinic Jews, the human being was defined first and foremost as a body--animated, to be sure, by a soul--while for Hellenistic Jews and many early Christians, the essence of a human being is a soul housed in a body. In late antiquity itself, both Jews and Christians realized and remarked (with mutual acrimony) this difference around the body as a key area of cultural contention between them” (Boyarin, pp. 5-6).

The Hebrew word for a human life is “*nefesh*,” which usually is translated to mean “soul.” That translation can confuse the English reader, for when the term “*nefesh*” is used, it always refers to a soul that is joined with a live, human body--or, I would argue, a body animated by a soul. The word “*nefesh*” appears throughout the Torah, but the word “*n’shamah*,” which means “soul,” does not: again, note the emphasis on the body.

Early Christian theologians, especially Augustine, claimed that by placing so much focus on our bodies, especially in the area of sexuality, we miss opportunities to engage in the spiritual realm. Peter Brown, a leading modern interpreter of the Church fathers, writes, “As the rabbis chose to represent it, sexuality was an enduring adjunct of the personality...Among the Christians the exact opposite occurred...precisely because its disappearance in the committed individual was considered possible, and because this disappearance was thought to register...the qualities necessary for leadership in the religious community. The removal of sexuality--or, more humbly, removal from sexuality--stood for the state of unhesitating availability to God and one’s fellow...” (Boyarin, p. 3). We can explore differing views of sexuality another time; for today, the point is that we do value sexuality as an important and sacred aspect of human life.

Sources from antiquity and throughout the rabbinic period reinforce the Jewish notion that maintaining health and well being hold supreme importance in the rabbinic mind. Our talmudic sages developed the

doctrine of *Pikuach Nefesh*, saving a life, based on the principle of sustaining life at almost any cost. They base *pikuach nefesh* on the Torah's statement "*v'chai bahem*," "and you will live by them, which they interpret to mean that the *mitzvot* should support and enhance our lives, and not limit our physical well being.

Every morning we thank God for having faith in us to be in this world, alive, and we bless God for the bodily systems that support us so that we can do the work of living productively and working with God to build a world of love and compassion. We acknowledge in sacred words that our priorities revolve around living physically in this world, and that we need and appreciate our the gift of working parts.

Clearly, and despite being referred to as the "People of the Book," our tradition understands that we are not just souls with legs or talking heads. Our bodies matter, and so we have many rules for how to care for them. Just look in the *Mishna Brurah* if you want to know how our sages would have us perform the full range of bodily functions, from intimate acts to how we should put on our shoes.

But— just as our tradition emphasizes the physical, it is clear from today's *parashah* that we are not **only** bodies animated by souls. While our primary concern rests with our physical well being, there **is** a higher purpose behind emphasizing physical well being, and I suspect that its source lies in our *parashah*. Moshe instructs the Israelites that that they must internalize the understanding that human beings do not live by bread alone, but by what God provides— "*Ki lo al ha-lechem l'vado y'chye ha'adam, ki al kol motza pi Adoshem yichye ha'adam*" (Deut. 8:3). The emphasis on physical well being is coupled with the expectation that we will practice gratitude. The Torah only commands two prayers. One, known as "*Arami oveid avi*," the "My father was a wandering Aramean" text that we now recall in the *Pesach Haggadah*, was to be recited when bringing first fruits to the *kohanim* in the Temple. The other prayer the Torah commands—not in liturgical form but in its imperative—remains with us to this day, and it comes from today's *parashah*: it is, of course, *Birkat HaMazon*, the Grace after Meals. Moshe says, "You will eat and you will be satisfied and you will bless the Lord, your God, for the good land God gave you"—"*V'achalta v'savata uverachta et Adoshem Elokecha al ha'aretz hatova asher natan lach*" (Deut. 8:10).

The *Sfat Emet* notes the importance of offering blessing after we have eaten our fill in the good Land God has provided. He is concerned about the spiritual risk of satiety. When we are sated, he believes, we lose our sense of vulnerability, spiritually and emotionally. Even if we continue to perform our ritual obligations, he argues, if we are not feeling a bit hungry, we will not have the spiritual yearning that draws us closer to God. If we are too full, we will go through the motions without forging a meaningful connection to the Divine spirit in that space where yearning lies. We may also be led to sin, based on feeling powerful and forgetting that it is only through God's grace that we are alive and able to eat food at all. In the *Sfat Emet's* view, the command to give thanks--to recite *Birkat HaMazon*--coming as it does in our *parashah* when Moshe describes the rich Land of Israel, serves as a crucial antidote against complacency.

And what is wrong with complacency, you may ask? Don't we love the feeling of being sated? The *Sfat Emet* may be a bit extreme here, but I have observed that too much complacency can erode compassion. When we are truly grateful, we know to our core what *Parashat Eikev* tells us: We did nothing to deserve the radical gift of being alive and well. Realizing that, we understand our moral and religious duty to care for others in need. Thus, the benefits of gratitude extend well beyond the individual benefits modern science has documented. Our gratitude stirs us to open our hands to the needy. Physical satisfaction coupled with gratitude stimulates compassion. And that is the secret sauce.

The *Bal Shem Tov* offers a related teaching about the body, a beautiful message for Shabbat, and with this I will conclude. The *Bal Sem Tov* says that in order for our souls to experience the joy of Shabbat most fully, as we are meant to do, our bodies need to experience physical joy. He says that just as we give our land a rest every seven years, we must bring physical relief to our bodies every seven days. We should consciously and intentionally show our bodies all of the love we can. He is not talking only of rest, but also of good food and sensual pleasure. Our physical happiness touches our soul, moving it to sing, to praise, and to soar.

This Shabbat, let us be mindful of the awesome gifts of being alive in our bodies. May we care for them, enjoy them, and appreciate their potential

for doing good in this world, so that we can bring both joy and compassion to our souls and to all of humanity.
Amen.