



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

BY RABBI DR. TZVI HERSH WEINREB  
OU EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT, EMERITUS

### “Heel, Heal, and Hope”

The first verse in this week’s Torah portion, *Ekev*, (Deuteronomy 7:12-11: 25), presents a difficulty for those who choose to translate each word literally. Indeed, many translators simply avoid translating the word in question.

I refer to the word *ekev*, which literally means the heel, the bottom of one’s foot. If we were to translate the verse literally, it would read, “It will be heel you heed these laws, always vigilant to keep them, the Lord your God will keep with you the covenant and the oath He forged with your ancestors.” Obviously, the word “heel” makes no sense in this context.

The traditional commentaries deal with this difficulty in various ways. Rashi, for example,

suggests the following: “If you keep even those laws which men tend to tread upon with their heel... The Lord your God will keep the covenant etc.”

Rashi’s lesson is certainly an important one. We are certainly inclined to belittle, or even neglect, rules which we consider unimportant. But although this approach has homiletic value, it goes beyond the plain meaning of the text.

Others adopt an alternative translation offered by Targum Onkelos, who finds that the word *ekev* need not mean “heel” at all, but can mean “in exchange for”. Hence, “... in exchange for your keeping the laws, the Lord will keep His covenant, etc.”

Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban, or Nachmanides) supports the view of his predecessor, Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra, who understands *ekev* to often mean the “end result”, just as the “heel” is the “end result”, the “bottom line”, of the human body. Thus, the meaning of the verse, according to these major commentators, is something like this: “It will be in the end, after which you will have heeded and kept these laws, that the Lord will reward you by keeping His covenant... He will love you, bless you, and multiply you. He will bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your land... You shall be blessed over all other peoples... Free from all sickness ... etc.”

This approach, which might be considered a “consensus” translation, raises a fundamental question. Are we to observe the Lord’s

In loving memory of  
our dear Mother, Grandmother  
& Great-grandmother

**Ruth Friedson a”h**

**רבקה בת זאב ע”ה**

on her first yahrzeit  
20 Menachem Av

*Arlene Saslow and the Friedson family  
Billauer, Wimpfheimer, Ehrlich,  
Fleischer and Saslow families*

commandments to receive a reward? Is our worship of the Creator no more than a children's game with prizes at the end for the winner?

Are we not enjoined by the ancient sage Antigonos of Sokho “not to be like servants who serve their master on condition of receiving a reward...”? (*Pirkei Avot* 1, paragraph 3).

Surely our spiritual aspirations would be better served if we would adopt Maimonides' eloquent climax to his *Laws of Repentance* (*Hilchot Teshuvah* 10:2):

“One who worships out of love, studies Torah, performs *mitzvot*, and walks the paths of wisdom, but not because of worldly considerations—he does not do so because of fear of disaster and not to gain benefit, but to commit to truth because it is truth (*oseh ha'met mipnei shehi emet*). This, in the end, will bring only good in its wake.”

There is a perspective upon this dilemma which appeals to me. It is based upon a comparison of the first two *parshiyot*, or passages, in the recitation of the *Shema*.

It happens that both passages, which the devout Jew recites twice a day every day of the year, are to be found in last week's and this week's Torah portions, *Va'etchanan* and *Ekev*.

The first of the passages of *Kriat Shema* is to be found in last week's Torah portion, in *Chumash Devarim* (Deuteronomy 6:4-9). It reads, in Rabbi Jonathan Sacks' excellent translation: “Listen, Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One. Love the LORD with all your heart... These words which I command you today shall be on your heart. Teach them repeatedly to your children... Bind them as a sign on your hand, they shall be an emblem between your eyes. Write them on the doorposts of your house and gates.”

Note that several important *mitzvot* are prescribed above, including the study of Torah and teaching it to one's children, the *tefillin*, and the *mezuzah*.

Note too that no reward is promised for keeping these commandments, and no punishment is threatened for failing to do so. The motive is love for the Almighty, no more and no less.

Now I must give you a brief lesson in one of the differences between the Hebrew and the English language. In English, there is no distinction between the second person singular and the second person plural. If I speak to one friend, I address him as “you” and if I speak to an audience of a thousand, I refer to them as “you”. Hebrew, however, distinguishes between singular and plural. In speaking to one friend, I refer to him as *atah*, but when I address an audience of many, I refer to them as *atem*.

The first passage of the *Shema*, which I just excerpted above, is spoken to each of us singularly, individually. Each one of us is commanded to study Torah, to have a *mezuzah* on our doorpost, et cetera, out of love for our Creator, consistent with the teaching of the ancient Antigonos and the medieval Maimonides.

The second passage, on the other hand, is spoken to the Jewish nation as a whole, in the plural form of the second person. This passage is to be found in this week's *Parshat Ekev* (Deuteronomy 11:13-21). It reads:

“If you indeed heed My commandments... I will give rain in your land in its season... And you shall gather in your grain, wine and oil... And you shall eat and be satisfied... Be careful lest your heart be tempted and you go astray and worship other gods... Then the LORD's

anger will flare against you, and He will close the heavens so that there will be no rain... “

Note that when the entire Jewish nation is addressed, rewards are promised and punishments threatened.

The lesson is clear. Each of us as individuals must keep the commandments as the central component of our spiritual attachment to the Lord. We are not to act morally for personal benefit, nor are we to refrain from wrongdoing out of fear of divine retribution.

An entire nation cannot be expected to develop such a spiritual attachment. Obedience is demanded of the nation, and obedience is best achieved by virtue of behavioral reinforcement, reward or punishment.

Rabbi Yehudah Shaviv, in his wonderful book on the weekly *parshiyot* entitled *MiSinai Ba*, uses a similar concept to explain the text of one of the prayers in the weekday *Amidah*. It is the phrase in the blessing *Al HaTzaddikim*, “The Righteous”. It reads, “Grant a good reward to all who sincerely trust in Your name.”

Rabbi Shaviv asks, “Doesn’t this prayer contradict the directive of Antigonus, that we are not to seek reward for our good deeds?”

He responds, “Truthfully, when we recite the *Amidah* prayers three times each weekday, we do not pray as individuals, we do not seek personal favors. We ask for a better world, a redeemed world, that the Divine guidance of the Holy One, Blessed Be He, become revealed to us all, that evil be eradicated, that the righteous be recognized. For the Jew knows and declares and pleads morning, afternoon, and evening, that there is justice and a Judge, and that justice will prevail, and that then all will distinguish between those who sincerely worship the Lord, and those who do not.” ■



## **The Tzimmerim @ Weissman Farms**



**The perfect pastoral venue  
for a family getaway!**

**Enjoy Shabbat in the dati moshav  
Sde Ilan in the Lower Galilee**

**Room for up to 26 guests**

**Fully equipped kosher outdoor  
kitchen**

**Spacious indoor dining area**

**Pool heated year-round and  
covered in winter**



**WhatsApp/Call Ira @ 050-630-2312**

**Website: Weissman.Farm**