

Ekev

1 August 2026

All week long, I've been thinking: if only there were a way to work in *The Odyssey* into this drasha. But that inspiration didn't arrive, so I'm going with my original script.

Our parsha this week, Ekev, consists primarily of Moses telling us all the good things that will happen if we obey God's commandments, and all the bad things that will happen if we don't. It's a message that doesn't take any special religious training to understand, because it sounds a lot like saying "If you clean up your room and take the dog for a walk, you can have that ice cream cone. But if you don't..."

And then, right at the end of the parsha, in a section we didn't read today, Ch 11:13, is this paragraph. You will recognize it. It begins:

וְהָיָה אִם-שָׁמַעַתְּ תִשְׁמָעוּ אֶל-מִצְוֹתַי אֲשֶׁר אֲנִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם הַיּוֹם
לְאַהֲבָה אֶת-יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וּלְעֵבְדוֹ כָּל-לְבַבְכֶם וּכָל-נַפְשְׁכֶם:

If, then, you obey the commandments that I enjoin upon you this day, loving the LORD your God and rendering service with all your heart and soul...

This, of course, became the second passage after the Shema, recited twice a day, every day. This section has always puzzled me, because it has always seemed to me very much like the first passage after the Shema, the ve'ahavta. Both passages say:

- Speak [these words] when you sit in your home
- Teach them to your children
- Bind them as a sign upon your hand
- And as a symbol above your eyes
- Inscribe them on the doorposts of your home
- And on your gates

Well, you know our faith tradition: as soon as you say to yourself *I've always wondered about this*, or *this text is almost the same as that one*, now you have to try and figure out why. So why do we read both of these passages after the Shema?

The commentary in our Etz Hayim notes that the first passage is in the singular, while the second is in the plural. This distinction is plain as day to a Hebrew reader, but is completely invisible in English, because in English the words *you* and *your* are both singular and plural.

And since I'm standing here on this handy soapbox, I want to take a moment to enlist all of you in my campaign to restore the words *thou*, *thee*, *thy*, and *thine* to the English language, words so thoughtlessly tossed away in the mid-17th century. Second person singular! If the ve'ahavta read like this:

Thou shalt love ADONAI *thy* God with all *thy* heart, with all *thy* soul, and with all that is *thine*...

Bind them as a sign upon *thy* hand, and as a symbol above *thine* eyes...

...if the ve'ahavta read like that, then, in the second passage, when it reads *bind them as a sign upon your hand, and as a symbol above your eyes*, it would be immediately obvious that the first passage was in the singular, and the second in plural. Done and done. (Actually, the ve'ahavta does read like that, provided you're reading the King James Version, published in 1611. The only other time most Americans experience *thou* is at a Shakespeare play. I'll let you know in a few years how my campaign works out.)

So why do we read both of these passages after the Shema? The more I tried to find out, the more it was clear the commentators didn't want to talk about the duplication of the mitzvot of mezuzot and tefillin. The commentators only want to talk about the first part of the second passage, our parsha theme today:

If you obey the commandments... I will grant the rain for your land in season, the early rain and the late. You shall gather in your new grain and wine and oil. I will also provide grass in the fields for your cattle, and thus you shall eat your fill. Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods... or there will be no rain. And the ground will not yield its produce, and you shall perish from the good land.

Etz Hayim points out that if this message had been included in the first passage, in the singular, the departure from actual life experience would be too obvious. If *thou* doth observe the mitzvot, then I shall reward *thee*—but it was clear to everyone in ancient times that it doesn't necessarily work like that. Would God cause the rain to fall only on the farms of the pious and leave the evil farms high and dry? Of course not: in real life, the evil are often rewarded while the good are often punished. Every generation understands this, even today, even this week. So instead, the rabbis placed the carrot and the stick in the plural passage: if all-of-you do observe the mitzvot, then all-of-you will be rewarded.

But that still leaves us with “why do bad things happen to good people?”—a theological dilemma as old as humanity. Many sections of the Tanach address this, but in different ways. In Devarim, it's simple: if you obey the mitzvot, then you shall be rewarded. Other writers are more nuanced. Jeremiah has the guts to point out the bitter facts of life. Most famously, in the book of Job, the reason for our suffering, if there is one, is withheld from us by God, who chastises our presumption to even ask: *where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?* And two weeks ago, we sat here in the dark, reading Eichah. Why were we punished? Why were we abandoned? Why why why?

When Cynthia Whitehead called me a couple of weeks ago, asking if I would give this drasha, I happened to be in the middle of reading *Unorthodox*, Deborah Feldman's memoir about her childhood, adolescence and arranged marriage in Brooklyn's

Satmar Hasidic community, and her subsequent escape with her son at the age of 23. Endlessly frustrated by the stifling rules of Satmar life, young Devoireh (as they call her) sneaks over to the public library, checks out books and smuggles them back home to read in secret as a way to mentally escape: Sholom Aleichem, *The Chosen*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre*, *Watership Down*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, *Harry Potter*. She particularly identifies with Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, who also is trapped in a society where all her actions are codified, she is watched like a hawk, gossip is everywhere, and the purpose of life is to find a husband. Most of the other girls in the Satmar community can barely speak English, but because she reads all these books, Devoireh's English is excellent. She hides her forbidden books under the mattress and beneath her lingerie.

A major thread running through Feldman's book is suffering: hers and all the women around her: her friends, her grandmother. If you observe the mitzvot, you shall be rewarded, but that's not what life is like for Devoireh. Every day of her life is an exercise in stage acting: happy and obedient when the curtain is up, anguished yet defiant backstage. When Devoireh asks her Bubby why bad things happen to good people, Bubby's answer is Satan. Not Hashem, only Satan, which of course makes no sense to Devoireh. Hashem created everything, why would Hashem create something so terrible as Satan, and then let Satan make his chosen people miserable?

Devoireh is taught how the Satmar bear the heavy burden of strictly obeying the Hashem's commandments. The Satmar, for themselves at least, have answered the question about why the Shoah happened: it was because all the other Jews in the world ignored the commandments, and now the Satmar must shoulder not only their own transgressions but those of all other Jews. Devoireh muscles up a defiant attitude towards God: ok, Hashem, I'm a good person but my life is miserable. I can handle it. Do your best, Hashem. Show me what you've got.

I feel that the Abrahamic religions are not well-designed to answer this dilemma, why bad things happen to good people. And it's not just humans. Consider, if you will, a young wildebeest on the Serengeti plain in Africa. He asks his mother "Mommy, why do bad things happen to good wildebeest?" But there's not much that Mom can say, because the fate of every wildebeest is to end up in a lion's stomach. It could happen when he's a young calf, or when he's grown wildebeest but sick with the flu, or it could happen when he's old and his joints don't work like they used to. But sooner or later, every wildebeest is going to be lunch. So, what's the answer? Some questions do not have answers.

Years ago, I had a job working with mathematicians, and this is also true in mathematics. Some questions do not have answers: they can be proven not to have answers. So, you move on to other questions. In my final analysis, at least: be a good person. Use your time well. Perform acts of lovingkindness. And remember what Hillel said: that which is hurtful to you, do not do to your neighbor. All the rest is commentary.