

8-01-62 Message to Olive Tree - *Ekev* (“if” or “because”)
Torah Portion: Deut 7-12 – 11:25
Haftarah: Isaiah 49:14 – 51:3
Suggested Acheron K’tuvim: Matt 6:16-21

Difficult Commandments, Conditional Blessings

Central question: Are some Commandments too minor to keep?

Today we are in parasha *Ekev*. It takes its name from the sixth word in the English, and the second word in the original Hebrew.

Deuteronomy 7:12-13

12 "Then it shall come about, **because** you listen to these judgments and keep and do them, that the Lord your God will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness which He swore to your forefathers. 13 And He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock, in the land which He swore to your forefathers to give you.

וְהָיָה | עַקֵּב | הַשְׁמָעוּן | אַתָּה | הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים | הָאֵלֶּה | 12
 Wherefore it shall come to pass, if ye hearken to judgments, these
1961 6118 8085 853 4941 428

וְשָׁמְרֵתֶם | וַעֲשִׂיתֶם | אֲתֶם | וְשָׁמַר | יְהוָה | אֱלֹהֶיךָ | לְךָ | אֶת־
 and keep, and do them, that shall keep the Lord thy God unto thee
8104 6213 853 8104 3068 430 3807a 853

הַבְּרִית | וְאֵת־ | הַחֶסֶד | אֲשֶׁר | נִשְׁבַּע | לְאֲבֹתֶיךָ:
 the covenant and the mercy which he sware unto thy fathers:
1285 853 2617 834 7650 1

וְאִתְּךָ | וּבֵרַכְךָ | וְהִרְבֵּךְ | וּבֵרַךְ | וְיִבְרַךְ | פְּרִי־ 13
 And he will love thee, and bless thee, and multiply thee: and bless thee, the fruit of
157 1288 7235 1288 1288 6529

בִּטְנְךָ | וּפְרִי־ | אֲדָמָתְךָ | דָּגָנְךָ | וְתִירְשֶׁךָ | וְיִצְהָרְךָ |
 thy womb, and the fruit of thy land, thy corn, and thy wine, and thine oil,
990 6529 127 1715 8492 3323

שִׁגְר־ | אֶלְפֵיךָ | וַעֲשֵׂתְךָ | צֹאנְךָ | עַל | הָאֲדָמָה | אֲשֶׁר־
 the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep, in the land which
7698 504 6251 6629 5921 127 834

נִשְׁבַּע | לְאֲבֹתֶיךָ | לָתֶת | לְךָ:
 he sware unto thy fathers to give thee.
7650 1 5414 3807a

In this parasha, Moses connects the instructions found in the other four books of Torah to the blessings that G-d has promised.

In the previous four books, the commandments are given in terms of what to do, and how to do it. In Devarim, Moses is now giving us more of the picture – he gives us the “why” behind some of the commandments, as

well as the “because” which sets out the benefits we get for doing what G-d has instructed us to do.

Let’s go back a few verses into the end of the last parasha, *Vaetchanan*, to get the context.

Deut 7:7-11

7 The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, 8 but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. 9 Know therefore that the Lord your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments; 10 but repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face. 11 Therefore, you shall keep the commandment and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them.

Moses is setting out a logical argument regarding why G-d preserved the Hebrew people from slavery in Egypt, and how G-d judges harshly those who hate G-d. Then Moses basically says, “Don’t be like those people.”

The final sentence in that parasha leads us directly into the first sentence of today’s parasha.

11 Therefore, you shall keep the commandment¹ and the statutes and the judgments which I am commanding you today, to do them.

Even in the days of Moses, the instructions of Torah were separated into three categories. It is good to remember what those categories are, and how this helps us understand the meaning of the next parasha.

1. Testimonies (Eidot). These speak of “witness” for when we do these things, we are a visible witness to the world of our relationship with G-d. Some of these serve to remind us of all the commandments of G-d. Although they could be explained by rational argument, mankind would not have developed them without being first instructed by G-d. Once G-d gave us these

¹ On occasion, the entirety of Torah’s commandments are considered as one command. So, “the commandment” is a shorthand way of invoking all the Torah as if it were a single command.

commands, we were then able to spiritually recognize that they were good for us. These include both moral and ritual obligations which guide ethical behavior and worship. Observing the Shabbat, and all the other Lev 23 festivals are part of these. The *t'fillin*, the *tzitzit*, *kippah* and the *mezuzah* are likewise in this category. When we observe and do all the commandments of Torah, we provide the greatest witness into this world, so the term “commandments” also invokes the idea of “witness.”

2. Statutes (Chukim). These are laws that seem to defy human understanding, or are seen as contrary to human logic. They are to be followed without understanding, simply because G-d gave them to us. The kosher laws, laws regarding not mixing certain fabrics, the rituals of the red heifer, and putting away leaven during Passover are examples. If G-d had not decreed them, mankind would not have discerned them or made them a cultural law. Following these instructions with limited (or no) rational understanding of their benefits is evidence that a person recognizes divine authority and is voluntarily submitting to G-d simply because He is G-d.
3. Judgments (Mishpatim). These are laws generally based on justice and societal structure. Human judgment and reason would likely

have fashioned these laws as well, even if G-d had not spoken them. They promote fairness and order within the community. These laws established the court system, and how trials are to be conducted.

So, with this in mind, we can start to delve a bit deeper into the first passage in this week's parasha.

Deut 7:12

12 "Then it shall come about, because you listen to these judgments and keep and do them, that the Lord your God will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness which He swore to your forefathers.

12

הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים	אֵת	הַשְּׁמָעוֹן	עֲקֹב	וְהָיָה		
judgments,		ye hearken to	if	Wherefore it shall come to pass,		
<u>4941</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>8085</u>	<u>6118</u>	<u>1961</u>		
אֱלֹהֶיךָ	יְהוָה	וְשָׁמְרָם	אֲתָם	וַעֲשִׂיתֶם	וְשָׁמְרֶתֶם	הָאֵלֶּה
thy God	the Lord	that shall keep	them,	and do	and keep,	these
<u>430</u>	<u>3068</u>	<u>8104</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>6213</u>	<u>8104</u>	<u>428</u>
נִשְׁבַּע	אֲשֶׁר	הַחֶסֶד	וְאֵת־	הַבְּרִית	אֶת־	לְךָ
he swear	which	the mercy	and	the covenant		unto thee
<u>7650</u>	<u>834</u>	<u>2617</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>1285</u>	<u>853</u>	<u>3807a</u>
לְאֲבוֹתֶיךָ:						
unto thy fathers:						
<u>1</u>						

Moses is combining all the commands found in the other four books of Torah, composed in the three categories he listed in the previous passage, into the single concept of “judgments.”

I want to focus on the second word of the passage, the word that gives our parasha its name, *ekev*.

The literal meaning of *ekev* is “heel.” We see this root word becoming part of the name of our forefather Yacov, who emerged from the womb with his hand holding Essav’s heel.²

OT:6118 עֵקֶב **ʿeqeb** (ay'-keb); from OT:6117 in the sense of OT:6119; heel, i.e. (figuratively) the last of anything (used adverbially, for ever); also result, i.e. compensation; and so (adverb with preposition or relatively) on account of:

Our Sages found it curious that the word “heel” should be found in this passage, even if the word can be interpreted as “as a result (of a continuing process).” They thought there must be more.

Chaim ben Moshe ibn Attar (1696-1743) of Morocco, was one of the most prolific and respected Torah commentators. His teachings were

² Gen 25:26

compiled into a work called Ohr Ha-Chaim al Ha-Torah (the light of life of the Torah). He is also known today by “Ohr Ha-Chaim.” He noticed the word *ekev* in the passage and said:

וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמָעוֹן, "It will be because you hearken, etc." Why did the Torah have to write the word וְהָיָה? If the word refers to G'd keeping His covenant with us, i.e. וְשָׁמַר... אֶת הַבְּרִית, it would have sufficed for the Torah to write עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמָעוֹן without the word וְהָיָה as introduction. Another problem is the use of the word עֵקֶב instead of simply אִם "if." In a similar situation in Leviticus 26,3 the Torah wrote אִם בַּחֻקוֹתַי תֵּלְכוּ, "if you walk in My statutes." Tanchuma on our verse writes that the word עֵקֶב heel, is an allusion to the kind of commandments people ignore, i.e. step on with their heels because they consider them as inconsequential. This is a purely homiletical comment, of course.

The concept that the wording of this passage carries a deeper message was adopted by many scholars, and they seem to agree that using the word *ekev* suggests that certain of the commandments are being “trodden underfoot” as if they are inconsequential.

Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz (1550-1619) taught in Lublin, Poland, and his teachings were compiled into a work entitled *Keli Yekar* (precious vessel). In that volume, we find his analysis on the idea of *ekev*.

“And it shall be because [eikev] you will listen to these judgments.” Rashi explained if you will listen to the minor commandments that people tread with their heels [akeveihem]. He did not want to interpret “eikev” here in the sense of because Abraham listened to My voice (Genesis 26:5), because he found it difficult [to understand] since in the previous verse it was already stated and you shall keep the statutes and the judgments. So why did it mention here judgments without “statutes”? Rather, certainly the term “eikev” includes the statutes and hints at them with the word “eikev,” because Satan and the nations criticize them since their reasons are not known, and for this reason people treat them lightly and tread on them with their heel. This is what he [Rashi] meant by saying “if the minor commandments, etc.” Therefore, he mentioned them with the term “eikev” and not with the term “statutes,” to tell you that regarding the statutes that you were warned about above, perhaps because people tread on them with their heels, you might not be as

careful and zealous with them as with the judgments and laws whose benefits are obvious and known to you.

Therefore, I am saying that if also the statutes that are hinted at by “eikev,” even though people tread on them with their heels, nevertheless you should be careful with them just as with the judgments.

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And this is what is written at the end of Parashat Va’etchanan, And He repays those who hate Him to their faces, to destroy them; He will not delay with him who hates Him, He will repay him to his face (Deuteronomy 7:10). Therefore, you shall observe the commandment, and the statutes, and the judgments, which I command you this day, to do them (Deuteronomy 7:11). Rashi explains: “In his lifetime, He pays him his good reward in order to remove him from the World to Come.” This raises a difficulty: If a gentile performs some commandment, why is he called “one who hates Him” at the time of performing the commandment? Rather, it must be that even when a gentile performs a logical commandment, he does so only for his immediate sensory pleasure. Therefore, his judgment is according to what he determined for himself — to receive his reward in this world. But you should not act this way towards

the Lord your God. Rather, You shall observe, etc., which I command you — meaning, you should observe them because I commanded you, and not for your own pleasure. Then automatically, the judgments and statutes will be of equal importance in your eyes. Regarding this, the text makes a comparison: And it shall be, because you will hearken to these judgments (Deuteronomy 7:12), then it is fitting that the principal be preserved for you for the World to Come, and the Lord your God will keep for you, etc.

These teachings show us that Jewish theology is that those of us who are in the covenant relationship with G-d – including those who are fully grafted-into the family of Jews – are not to treat lightly any of G-d's commandments simply because they don't make sense to us today, or because the world around us tramples them and we wish to fit-in.

It also tells us that when those outside the covenant relationship with G-d keep the natural commandments of G-d, simply because it makes sense to them that they should do so, such does not benefit them at all in the world to come. They have their reward in this world already because they will be seen by others as living a good life. But they are not putting into their heavenly stores any merits to be accorded to them in the World to Come.

In this way classical Jewish theology proves quite reliable. We can find the same teachings from Yeshua.

Matt 5:43-6:9

43 "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.' 44 "But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you 45 in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. 46 "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax-gatherers do the same? 47 "And if you greet your brothers only, what do you do more than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? 48 "Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

6 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

2 "When therefore you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 3 "But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing 4 that your alms may be in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

5 "And when you pray, you are not to be as the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners, in order to be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 6 "But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, and when you have shut your door, pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will repay you. 7 "And when you are praying, do not use meaningless repetition, as the Gentiles do, for they suppose that they will be heard for their many words. 8 "Therefore do not be like them; for your Father knows what you need, before you ask Him.

Yeshua made it clear that when we do even the greatest of the commandments in a way that seeks glory from those around us, we lose all the kingdom benefits for that obedience.

Matt 6:16-21

16 "And whenever you fast, do not put on a gloomy face as the hypocrites do, for they neglect their appearance in order to be seen fasting by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full. 17 "But you, when you fast, anoint your head, and wash your face 18 so that you may not be seen fasting by men, but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will repay you.

19 "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. 20 "But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; 21 for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.

Yeshua made it very clear that we can be fooled by what we see in the apparently righteous acts of those around us. We can't clearly see the heart behind the actions. Yeshua can clearly see, and He will not be fooled.

Matt 7:21-23

"Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. 22 "Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' 23 "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'

And Yeshua turned the premise of this issue around as well. He declared that paying close attention to the instructions of Torah, even those instructions which seem to be of lesser value to us, will provide great rewards in the World to Come.

Matt 5:17-20

17 "Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to fulfill. 18 "For truly I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not the smallest letter or stroke shall pass away from the Law, until all is accomplished. 19 "Whoever then annuls one of the least of these commandments, and so teaches others, shall be

called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever keeps and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 "For I say to you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven.

How does the normative church treat the commandments of G-d found in Torah – both the great and the small commandments– today?

I find in a website called Biblical Hermeneutics³ the following discussion, which seems to be what I hear from most Chrisitans:

In Ephesians 2:15 exactly what part of the Law has been abolished?

"For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two." (Ephesians 2:15)

³ <https://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/19448/in-ephesians-215-exactly-what-part-of-the-law-has-been-abolished>

The law given to Moses at Sinai was abrogated with the advent of the new covenant. To put it a better way: The entirety of the Mosaic Covenant was fulfilled in Christ. The law of Moses no longer serves as direct and immediate judge over the lives and conduct of God's people. God's children today obey the Law of Christ [Gal 6.2, 1 Cor 9:21].

Jesus, who is better than Moses, in his sermon on the mount served as the new law giver establishing his new commandments [Matt 5:19]. In that sermon he expounded on the law that Jer 31 said would be written in the believer's inward parts. The law written on man's heart is vastly different than the ministration of death written on tablets of stone [2 Cor 4:7]. The former comes as a result of God's gracious gift of faith which results in the new birth. The latter was a non-gracious covenant with terms that were "obey or perish" [Gal 3:12].⁴

Now contrast that with the promise the Yeshua gave through John on Patmos, as Yeshua was speaking regarding the congregation of Thyatira,

Rev 2:25-29

⁴ This is a close summary of the heresy of Marcion, which seems to persist today.

'Nevertheless what you have, hold fast until I come. 26 'And he who overcomes, and he who keeps My works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations; 27 and he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as the vessels of the potter are broken to pieces, as I also have received authority from My Father; 28 and I will give him the morning star. 29 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

The covenant of G-d with those in covenant relationship with Him is not something that He will discard. You who are in that relationship can have confidence in that. But the blessings of G-d, according to today's parasha, are conditional.

Do you wish to have the favor of G-d? Then be careful not to trample upon His commandments. The world will tell you that some of the commandments are not all that important. You will see them trampled underfoot by the goyim every day. Your heart will tell you that since they don't make sense, they might not even be a real commandment.

Nothing that G-d has said is of little value. Live worthy of the calling with which you have been called. And see blessings follow.