



## D'var Torah - Parashat Eikev – Aug. 24, 2024

By Morry Safer

Shabbat Shalom!

My name is Morry Safer and this week we read Parashat Eikev - the third parashah in the book of Devarim. My wife Rachel and the Book of Devarim have a lot in common – both find themselves frustratingly repeating things I should have remembered the first time they were instructed. Sefer Devarim, meaning “Book of Things” or more colloquially “Book of Stuff” is precisely why any good directions in creating a system of organization recommend against creating a “Miscellaneous” category. With the narrative of the Torah largely complete, we get retellings of the highlight lessons with limited chronology or developing themes. So, in the spirit of Sefer Devarim, I’d like to share some exploration about two familiar liturgical highlights in Parashat Eikev. Not a d’var torah... but two devarim of torah in contrast.

The first “dvar” I’d like to discuss is Chapter 8, Verse 10, the conclusion of the first aliyah:

וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשִׂבַעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת־יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ עַל־הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן־לְךָ:

When you have eaten your fill, give thanks to your G'd " for the good land given to you.

This verse is familiar to most from its citation in the middle of Birkat Hamazon. Forgive me for the brief diversion, but I’ve been thinking a lot lately about the most unusual Birkat Hamazon Rachel and I have experienced. We were visiting our friends Brian and Sari in Toronto. Their family is all grown up now, but at the time they had two kids - their 6-year old son had just started kindergarten at the local Sefardic school. Their three-year old daughter was in preschool. At the conclusion of Shabbat lunch, Brian led Birkat Hamazon beginning with Shir Hamalot. Next, everyone sang “Avarcha et Hashem” as was being taught in the Sefardic school. With Brian and the son each getting to “choose a song”, the daughter insisted on also getting to choose one, so together we all sang a verse of “Twinkle, Twinkle” before continuing with Birkat.

Now, it is unlikely that your specific Birkat Hamazon tradition also includes “Twinkle Twinkle”, but the reality is that the mitzvah in the Torah doesn’t provide any specifics. The idea of a Grace after Meals is a pretty fungible concept in the rabbinic tradition: depending on what you’ve eaten, how many people you’ve eaten with, how much time you have, and other factors, there are many different formulations that fulfill V’Achalta, V’Savata, U’verachta. And even when we agree on doing a “full birkat hamazon”, my experience has taught me that when handed an unfamiliar bentcher at the end of the meal, I best pay close attention because there are likely going to be some differences in the formulations, grammar, and inclusions. At the very least, you can be assured of unique and inconsistent set of Harachaman verses reflecting the ideology of the Table, or at least the editor.

The fungibility of the text fulfilling the mitzvah of “U’verachta” is counterpointed in our liturgy by those formulations which are much more strictly followed and the most precisely defined is the first paragraph of the Amidah - known as “Avot” – the paragraph that begins “Elokei Avraham, Elokei Yitzchak, VElokei Ya’akov. Anyone who has engaged in discussion about gender inclusion of the coordinating Matriarchs is quickly alerted that the entire Avot paragraph is made up of precise quotations of the Torah. Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya’akov are specifically quoted as part of the Divine introduction to Moses at the Burning Bush; Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel and Leah are not. The Avot blessing continues, citing this morning’s fifth aliyah and bringing us to our second “d’var” of interest:

G!d who is Great, Mighty, and Awesome...

This precise sequence of three adjectives when concluded with the chatimah “Magen Avraham” – Shield of Abraham – attempt to introduce our Amidah prayers with praise and flattery articulated in the traditional language of toxic masculinity. Does this language reflect our prayers today? Tomorrow? Always? And if not, what options should we consider?

The Talmud, in Megillah 25a, considers the option of adding additional language to the paragraph, as it shares the following baraita:

A particular individual descended before the ark as prayer leader in the presence of Rabbi Ḥanina. The shaliach tzibur extended his prayer and said:

“האל הגדול הגבור והנורא האדיר והחזק והאמיץ”  
“G!d, the great, the mighty, and the awesome, the powerful, and the strong, and the fearless.”

When he finished, Rabbi Ḥanina said to him: Have you concluded **all** of the praises of your Master? Even these three praises that we recite: The great, the mighty, and the awesome, had Moses our teacher not written them in the Torah we would not be permitted to recite them.

Thus, for the Rabbis, this short, precise list somehow encapsulates the complete praise of G!dly attributes – and to add additional terms of praise only goes to highlight those which have been omitted.

On the other hand, there are a couple of examples in the Tanach where this same formulation is paraphrased, but with omission of one of the triplets.

As summarized in the Talmud Yerushalmi:

Rabbi Pinchas said: Moshe established the form of the Amidah: “The great, mighty, and awesome G!d”

The prophet Jeremiah, who witnessed the destruction of the First Temple said:

האל הגדול הגבור  
“The great and mighty G!d,” but did not say  
הנורא  
“awesome.”

Why did Jeremiah say “mighty”? One who can watch the destruction of His house and be quiet is fittingly called mighty. And why didn’t Jeremiah say “awesome”? Because only the now-destroyed Temple is awesome, as it says in Psalm 68: “Awesome is God from His Sanctuary.”

The biblical figure, Daniel, living during the Babylonian exile, said:

האל הגדול והנורא  
“The great awesome G!d” but did not say – הגבור – “mighty.” for His sons have been given over to chains, so where is [G!d’s] might?! And why did [Daniel] say “awesome”? For the awesome things [G!d] did for him personally in the Lion’s Den, [G!d] is fittingly called awesome.

Despite these historic examples of Jeremiah and Daniel modifying their own prayers to reflect a unique, timely relationship with G!d and our perhaps modern sensibility to do the same, our liturgical tradition firmly codifies the language of the Avot prayer.

As Rabbi Elie Kaunfer teaches:

These words have gone through an interpretive and historical journey, and the restored version of the phrase brings this journey with it. Thus, when the worshiper recites these words in the Amidah, it is not the idealized first encounter of Moshe's formulation, but a more history-worn version that has experienced the destruction of the Temple, God's restraint, and the placing of Israel in chains. The three adjectives—"great, mighty, and awesome"—are weighty ones, painfully aware of God's true actions—or lack thereof—in the world. We can say the full phrase again, but not without remembering the times when our prophets could not.

These four words, excerpted out of the middle of a verse in the middle of an aliyah in the middle of a parashah from the middle of the book of Devarim reinforce the view of G!d as the Almighty protector of our ancestors. As is often the case with such extracted quotations, the missing context of the original provides a very different interpretation.

First, those unfamiliar may be surprised to read that this strong, masculine language precedes the repetition of the most-recurrent Torah mitzvah:

וְאָהַבְתֶּם אֶת הַגֵּר

“And you should love the Stranger”

The complete verses:

“For G!d is the G!d of gods and the L!rd of lords. The great, mighty, and awesome G!d who shows no favor and takes no bribe; who does justice for the orphan and widow, and loves the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”

Despite the commonly-quoted strong language which might suggest otherwise, G!d's involvement with the orphan, widow and stranger suggest a softer side, and it is exactly that softer side which we are commanded to imitate. Midrash Tanchuma specifically cites this verse as one of seven places in the Tanach where G!d is likened to the humblest of Men.

As Rabbi Kaunfer continues teaching, the phrase “great, mighty, and awesome” in Parashat Eikev is not a description of God's cosmic or miraculous creative abilities, but serves as an illustration of God's **ethical** commitments to the most vulnerable members of society. God does not take bribes, the currency of those with resources. Rather, God does justice for the widow and orphan, who have no resources. God loves the stranger, and, acting on that love, gives food and clothing.

For those looking for a more balanced representation of G-d's nature compared to that presented in the Amidah, it was there the whole time! Just a little bit further, a more complete quotation, and we'd have a completely different embodiment of the Divine in our daily prayers. Or perhaps, through our abbreviated quotation, our prayers can reflect through implication the larger totality of Hashem's greatness.

As we gather together in joyful prayer, we can struggle as a community with those parts of our liturgy which remain fixed, like the formulation of the Avot, and those which offer more flexible expression such as the Birkat Hamazon. In all cases, may we find meaning in both the words we share and those we omit, realizing the power of a long tradition forever reflected in our current modern sensibilities.

Shabbat Shalom.