

Poetic Echoes in Deuteronomy's Ekev

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To comprehend the Hebrew Bible is to engage in a task of reading that, to my mind, exposes many of the pleasures and difficulties faced by the modern Jewish reader who encounters ancient, and in that sense distant or even alien, ways of thinking. Reading the Hebrew Bible is for me a task that is, at one and the same time, demanding, energizing, pleasurable, frustrating, shocking, infuriating, surprising, wondrous and self-reflective. I expect that many of you who spend time reading the Bible have similarly complicated feelings about doing so. Today I want to discuss what happens when I acknowledge my own emotional responses to the content of the Bible but also take the time to notice or heed less obvious elements of the text that I, a lifelong student and a teacher of literature, would like to call the Bible's "poetic echoes."

Today's *parashah*, Ekev, or Deuteronomy Chapter 7, verse 12 through Chapter 11, verse 25, is primarily an exhortative section of the Bible that reminds the Israelites to cleave to the commandments of God—hence "*ekev*," which literally translates as heel or footstep, but which here signifies the causal construction "in consequence," or "following upon" — as in, "And so it shall follow if you do this...." The *parashah* thus thrusts us into the covenantal world of what God promises in exchange for the Israelites' faithful fulfillment of divine commandments, and threatens in response to their unfaithfulness. And yet, this is no dry discussion of a contract.

I find that reading Ekev's passages is an exercise in great, even wild, emotional swings within the space of even a few verses. I am delighted when I read the passage in Deut. 10:19 that instructs the Israelites to befriend or love the stranger, just as God does, because they too were strangers in Egypt. I read with satisfaction in Deut. 7:13 that God promises to bless the faithful Israelites with fecundity in agriculture, animal husbandry and childbearing; but just a moment later I am left bewildered by God's bald assertion that the Israelites are to be blessed *above* all other peoples (7:14) — מְכַל־הָעַמִּים, as we also say in the Shabbat Kiddush, but as my family quietly emends to "*im kol ha-amim*," or *with* all other peoples. My bewilderment at this hierarchy turns to disbelief and a slight feeling of discomfort when God promises to remove all barrenness from among the Israelites and even among their herds (7:14). And my discomfort turns to outright distress when God says not only that He will remove all sickness from among the Israelites but will in turn visit that sickness on their enemies (7:15).

And then, what I am to make of Deut. 7:16, wherein God promises that the Israelites shall “consume” all the peoples that God delivers unto them (וְאָכַלְתָּ אֹתָם -) (כָּל-הָעַמִּים, אֲשֶׁר יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ נִתֵּן לְךָ)? I can only struggle with such a phrase, which overlays the corporeal intimacy of eating with the dehumanized violence of conquest.

We are, of course, living in a different era than that in which the Bible was conceived, composed and composited, and in this, our liberal and civic-minded day and age, in a place far from the cradle of monotheistic religions where these words were written, it may be far too much to hope that we can fully understand the distant world of the biblical drama. Or can we? Is our contemporary culture any less hopeful, less credulous or reverent, less industrious, less violent and hierarchical, in short, less essentially human, than was the society of the ancient Israelites?

It goes almost without saying that, even if we identify ourselves as Jews with the ancient Israelites, we have very little sense indeed of how the words of our most central and sacred text were understood by them. I, for one, may simply be a far too literal reader to understand the significance of Deuteronomy’s exhortations, let alone to comprehend the worldly context of its original intended audience. In a remote place and time where the epic imagination by all accounts ran rampant, a text such as the Hebrew Bible might have had abiding popular appeal much in the way that apocalyptic novels and action films like *Mad Max* or *The Hunger Games* today appeal to unthinkably huge audiences in the local Cineplex. The fact that we understand the Bible as a holy text does not mean that our notion of sacredness is truly comparable to that of our ancestors the Israelites, or that our acknowledged literary, theological, political and social conventions are very much like theirs.

The work of interpretation must go on, however, because we are living, changing beings for whom the Bible makes sense only as a document of living, changing engagement with the world. In a religious context such as the Shabbat morning service here at Congregation Emanu-El, those of us who are not biblical scholars interpret the text in ways that make sense to us here and now, and so we endlessly wrestle with the cognitive dissonance that our modern religious (or secular) interpretations of the ancient text imply.

And those who, like me, come to the Bible from the standpoint of constitutive agnosticism or perhaps the love of contemporary hermeneutics can ask questions

that might have made little sense to the first readers of the Bible but that, nevertheless, in meaningful ways make sense to us.

I have already mentioned the “poetic echo.” I want to discuss poetic echoes without ignoring or forgetting all of the emotional content that I have been discussing. I see poetic echoes as another discourse that brings us to engage with the Hebrew Bible differently, with a greater attention to the time required to understand this complicated text and the human relations it describes. To read the Bible as poetry, rather than simply or only as a religious text, is inevitably to hear echoes of the poetic inspiration of the Bible’s authors. Let me discuss an example of such echoes in *parashat* Ekev so that you will not think I have only given you a prolegomenon to a *dvar torah*, and not the thing itself, today.

For those who, like me, frequently find themselves wrestling with the system of values embodied in the Torah and perhaps feeling unfaithful and even a little guilty for doing so, my example may strike you as apt. Deuteronomy 8:5 sets up a key comparison between God’s chastening of the People of Israel and a father’s chastening of his son.

And thou shalt consider in thy heart, that, as a man chasteneth his son, so the LORD thy God chasteneth thee. כִּי, כַּאֲשֶׁר יִיָּסֵר אִישׁ אֶת-בְּנוֹ, יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ, מִיָּסָרָךְ.

The author’s idea here, I think, is to point out that God’s chastening of the Israelites in Deuteronomy is, in fact, an act of love parallel to the love a parent naturally feels for a child. Whether or not one gives credit to the idea of *tough love* that seems to be implied here (I admit to having a hard time doing so), the poetic resonances that extend beyond literal meaning are worth pausing over. The terms translated here as “chasten,” *ye’yaser* and *m’yaserecha*, contain the Hebrew linguistic root *samech-resh*, or “*sar*,” which is the etymology of an array of words in Hebrew that carry the significance “against.” *L’sarev*, for example, means to refuse, and *lisrot* is to scratch or incise. The idea seems clear enough: *chastening* is a way of pushing back against a person or behavior.

The poetic echoes of the root *sar* can be heard elsewhere, too, in Ekev’s chapters. There is a clear poetic echo in Deut. 9:12, wherein God tells Moses to go back down from Sinai because the People of Israel has turned corrupt. They are quickly “turned aside,” *saru maher*, adjudges God, away from the path I commanded them. Here the same sense of going against – in this case, turning quickly away, *saru maher*—is used by the Bible to describe the misdeeds of the faithless

Israelites. The attentive reader, whether Israelite or modern, who hears this in Hebrew would recognize, I think, the echo of the word *ye'yaser*, or chastening, in the word *saru*, to “turn aside,” here. A connection has been made: to chasten is, for the God of the Bible, a loving, if stern, preventative of social and religious deviation.

An earlier poetic echo of the same root can be found in the term *hesir* (to take away), when God promises to “take away” all sickness from the Israelites (7:15) if they follow God’s commandments. And in the last chapter of the *parashah*, Moses reminds the Israelites that God is speaking explicitly to those who have seen and experienced divine chastisement (*musar*) (11:2) during the Exodus. The term *musar*, as modern Hebrew speakers know, is not only *chastisement* but also *morals* themselves. The sense here is that there is no morality without the possibility of chastisement and, extending the metaphor further, that morality itself is a function of *going against* the commonplace inattention to justice.

There are other such poetic echoes in Ekev, as elsewhere throughout the Bible. Sometimes they play on proper verbal etymologies; at other times, however, they are simply similar sounds that refract against each other as rhymes do, or mirror images that as an attentive critical reader of literature one cannot help but notice. All of this makes reading Ekev more than the raw emotional experience I described as my first impression. While such impressions do not abate, the Bible uses a vast range of poetic tools to draw me in to its endlessly recursive rhythms and its diverse styles of rhetoric.

I mentioned earlier that we necessarily understand little about the contexts in which the Bible was intended by its composers and compositors to be read. In this way, I said, we might compare popular forms of media, such as film, that will probably baffle our heirs living in a civilization far into the future. So here is one more echo: the root *samech-resh* is also found in the word *seret*, modern Hebrew for *movie*. This is probably because Eliezer Ben-Yehuda and his acolytes who reinvented modern Hebrew thought of movies as literally constructed of deposits on, or incisions against, a long strip of film. The etymology of something set against something else appears here once again, literalized in one of our most modern forms of visual poetry. The echoes of chastening, chastisement, turning away, removing, and even morality itself lead us to a more complex understanding of the endless fecundity – and perhaps even the divine mystery – of poetic language in this ancient text.

Shabbat shalom.