

# עֵקֶב

## EKEV/BECAUSE

### Devarim/Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25

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As we study this week's parasha, I will rely heavily on the insights of **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** ([www.chiefrabbi.org](http://www.chiefrabbi.org)) as he explains to us יהוה's idea of **wisdom** as it relates to **political doctrine**. We begin with what **Sacks** calls:

**The Ideal to which Israel is Called** (Israel keeps the commandments, יהוה provides a Land with all needs met):

*Devarim 8:6 "Therefore you shall **keep the commandments** of יהוה your Elohim, to walk in His ways and to fear Him.<sup>7</sup> "For יהוה your Elohim is **bringing you into a good land**, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, that flow out of valleys and hills;<sup>8</sup> "a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey;<sup>9</sup> "a **land in which you will eat bread without scarcity, in which you will lack nothing**; a land whose stones are iron and out of whose hills you can dig copper.*

**The Key to Success** (remembering to bless Him):

*Devarim 8:10 "When you have eaten and are full, then you shall **bless יהוה** your Elohim for the good land which He has given you.*

**The Danger which Israel would face in the Promised Land** (forgetting):

*Devarim 8:11 "Beware that you **do not forget יהוה** your Elohim by **not keeping His commandments**, His judgments, and His statutes which I command you today,<sup>12</sup> "lest -- when you **have eaten and are full**, and have built beautiful houses and dwell in them;<sup>13</sup> "and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied;<sup>14</sup> "when your heart is **lifted up, and you forget יהוה** your Elohim who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage;<sup>15</sup> "who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who brought water for you out of the flinty rock;<sup>16</sup> "who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end --<sup>17</sup> "then you say in your heart, 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.'<sup>18</sup> "And you shall remember יהוה your Elohim, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day.*

**Devarim 8:10** holds the key. After good things happen to you, will you remember or will you forget to whom you owe all this? If you recognize His power, bless Him and thank Him for it, then you will have a good future in the Land.

**Moshe** is aware of human nature. He knows what could happen once the **Israelites have gotten past the crises of the wilderness** and have **finally reached the Land of plenty**. This, however, is only the beginning. To quote **Rabbi Sacks**:

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“the **real challenge** is **not poverty** but **affluence**; **not slavery** but **freedom**; **not homelessness** but **home**. Many **nations (and individuals)** have been **lifted to great heights** when they **faced difficulty and danger**. They **fought battles and won**. They **came through crises** – droughts, plagues, recessions, defeats – and were **toughened by them**. When **times are hard**, **people grow**. They **come together**...the **real test** of a **nation** is **not, can it survive a crisis**, but **can it survive the lack of a crisis?** Can it **stay strong** during **times of ease and plenty, power, and prestige?** That is the **challenge** that has **defeated every civilization known to history**. Let it **not, says Moses, defeat you.**”

**Remember, remember, remember...the problem is, people forget.** People **lose track** of the **things they once fought for** and **especially of the One who led them through it**. Some become **strong, rich, and then self-indulgent**. They **may stop feeling responsible** for the **poor and the elderly**.

**Moshe** had **great insight**. He understood that the **faith of Israel** was **not like other religions**. He knew that **what Israel possessed** had the **potential to impact** the **other nations** of the world. Last week we read this:

*Devarim 4:6 "Therefore be careful to observe them (Torah); for this is your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples who will hear all these statutes, and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.'<sup>7</sup> "For what great nation is there that has Elohim so near to it, as יהוה our Elohim is to us, for whatever reason we may call upon Him?<sup>8</sup> "And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this Torah which I set before you this day?"*

According to the sages, the  **blessings** that the **Israelites receive for living out the ideal Torah lifestyle**, will be **living proof** that יהוה exists and **has a relationship with mankind**. In this way, the **Torah** would have an **impact beyond the borders of Israel** as **others sought inspiration from the Hebrew Scriptures**. Okay, let's get back to what we began with – **Torah principles as they apply to politics**. **Israel** was a family who was **chosen** and placed **under the authority of the Almighty**. He then took it **from bondage to freedom** and gave it the **responsibility to pursue the common good of one another**.

**No other country, outside of Israel, exemplified and pursued Torah principles** from its **inception more than the United States of America**. Although the **direction** in which the country's **leadership seems to be taking** it is without a doubt **questionable** and **frightening**, it may be **time** for all of us who remain here to **"remember"** where we have come from, to **give Him the glory** and to **thank Him** for the **many blessings**. **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** wrote extensively on **American roots** and the **forefathers**. Our **history books no longer** include these **important quotes** and sometimes we also are **guilty** of only looking at the **negatives**; but I wanted to give us **Americans** a chance to **look at** and **"remember"** the **good things** that have happened in **this country**. **"Remember"**, it is a **Torah principle** to **"remember"** what יהוה has done for us and to **"bless Him for the good land that He has given us"**.

**Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** writes on the **politics of a country following Torah principles** (emphasis mine):

“**Covenant** is the **politics of the word** (devarim). **Israel’s existence** as a nation, is **not based on power** or a **land** (although it longs for and is promised both) but **on words – the Words of G-d to Israel** and the **acceptance of those Words by Israel**. **So long as the Word exists, Israel exists; and because G-d is eternal and never revokes His Word, Israel will always exist.**”

For the **Israelites**, the **covenant document of Words** was the **Torah**. For those who came to **America**, it was the **words of the Declaration of Independence**. The **very existence of nations defined by covenant depends on devarim** (words). **Sacks continues:**

“One of its **most distinctive features** is that it is **essentially moral**. It sees the nation as **charged with a mission, a set of values, a destiny and responsibility**. The **health of the nation** is directly related to the **degree with which it is true to its vocation**. **John Schaar**, writing about the political beliefs of **Abraham Lincoln**, summarizes the idea well:

We are a **nation formed by a covenant**, by **dedication to a set of principles** and by an **exchange of promises to uphold and advance certain commitments** among ourselves and throughout the world. Those **principles and commitments** are the **core of American identity**, the **soul of the body politic**. They make the **American nation unique**, and uniquely valuable, among and to the other nations. But the other side of the conception contains a **warning very like the warnings spoken by the prophets to Israel: if we fail in our promises to each other, and lose the principles of the covenant, then we lose everything, for they are we.**

This serves as a good introduction to the proposition I want to argue here, namely that the **single greatest experiment in covenantal politics in modern times has been the United States**. From the beginning, **its founders saw themselves as the children of Israel of their day, escaping from Egypt (England) and a cruel Pharaoh (England’s kings), across the Red Sea (the Atlantic) to what George Washington called ‘the almost promised land.’**

In his 1849 novel *White-Jacket*, **Herman Melville** set out the **connection** between the **American dream** and the **story of Israel**:

We **Americans** are the **peculiar, chosen people – the Israel of our time**; we bear the ark of the liberties of the world. G-d has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls. The rest of the nations must soon be in our rear. We are pioneers of the world; the advance-guard, sent on through the wilderness of untried things, to break a new path in the New World that is ours.

The **story began in 1630**. Aboard the **Arabella** as it sailed for New England, **John Winthrop** articulated the **vision of the Pilgrim Fathers**. **Speaking in conscious imitation of Moses, he invited his fellow settlers to ‘enter into a covenant’ with G-d and to ‘follow the counsel of Micah, to do justly, to love mercy and to walk humbly with our G-d.’** If they failed to live up to the covenant **‘the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us,’** but if they were true to its terms, **‘The Lord will be our G-d, and delight to dwell among us, as his own people, and will command a blessing upon us in all our ways.’** They would then find **‘that the G-d of Israel is among us.’** Winthrop ended his oration by **quoting from Deuteronomy:**

I shall shut up this discourse with that **exhortation of Moses, that faithful servant of the Lord, in his last farewell to Israel (Deuteronomy 30). Beloved, there is now set before us life and good, death and evil, in that we are commanded this day to love the Lord our G-d, and to love one another, to walk in his ways and to keep his commandments and his ordinance and his laws, and the articles of our Covenant with him, that we may live and be multiplied, and that the Lord our G-d may bless us in the land whither we go to possess it... Therefore let us choose life that we and our seed may live, by obeying his voice and cleaving to him, for he is our life and our prosperity.**

What is **extraordinary** about America is that this **deeply theological way of speaking** about **national purpose did not end (as it did in Britain) with the 17<sup>th</sup> century.** It has **continued to this day.** One of the least well known, yet **sustained commentaries** to the **book of Deuteronomy** is the **collected inaugural addresses of American presidents, from George Washington to George W. Bush.**

In the **first inaugural in 1789, George Washington declared,** ‘It would be peculiarly improper to omit in this first official act **my fervent supplications to the Almighty Being who rules over the universe,**’ and warned that **‘the propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right which Heaven itself has ordained.’** In his second inaugural (1805), **Thomas Jefferson compared the story of America to the exodus: ‘I shall need, too, the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our fathers, as Israel of old, from their native land and planted them in a country flowing with all the necessaries and comforts of life.’**

More than a century and a half later, in **1961, John F. Kennedy** was **still using the same biblical cadences:**

**I have sworn before you and Almighty G-d the same solemn oath our forebears prescribed nearly a century and three quarters ago.** The world is very different now. For man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life. And yet the **same revolutionary beliefs** for which our forebears fought are still at issue around the globe – the belief that the **rights of man come not from the generosity of the state, but from the hand of G-d....With a good conscience our only sure reward, with history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that here on earth G-d’s work must truly be our own.**

Succeeding the assassinated Kennedy, **Lyndon Baines Johnson** spoke of **‘the American covenant’** in **language resonant with undertones of Exodus and Deuteronomy:**

They came here – the **exile and the stranger,** brave but frightened – to find a place where man could be his own man. **They made a covenant with this land.** Conceived in justice, written in liberty, bound in union, it was meant one day to inspire the hopes of all mankind; and **it binds us still. If we keep its terms, we shall flourish...**Under this covenant of justice, liberty and union we have become a nation – prosperous, great and mighty. And we have kept our freedom. **But we have no promise from G-d that our greatness will endure. We have been allowed by Him to seek greatness with the sweat of our hands and the strength of our spirit.**

In 2001, the vision still drove **George W. Bush**:

[W]e are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in His image... **Americans are generous and strong and decent, not because we believe in ourselves, but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves... We are not this [nation's] story's author, who fills time and eternity with his purpose. Yet his purpose is achieved in our duty, and our duty is fulfilled in service to one another.**

**No other country in the West uses this intensely religious vocabulary.** It is particularly striking in view of the fact that the **American constitution**, in the form of the First Amendment, **formally separates religion and state.**

It was the great French writer, **Alexis de Tocqueville**, who in the **1830's**, in the course of his classic *Democracy in America*, explained the paradox. There is a **separation between religion and state**, but **not between religion and society.** 'Religion in America,' he wrote, 'takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political instructions.' What he meant was that, though it **had no power**, it had **enormous influence.** It **sustained families.** It **bound communities together.** It prompted people to join voluntary organizations for the promotion of the common good. It was the **basis of a shared morality** which, precisely **because it was upheld by faith, did not have constantly to be enforced by law.** 'In France,' he noted, 'I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. In America I found they were **intimately united** and that they **reigned in common over the same country.**'

We owe to **Robert Bellah** the idea that **America** has a 'civil religion' – a **set of beliefs** and a **shared faith** that **underlie its public and political life.** A **public theology** has been **part of America's political culture** from the **very beginning.** That **public theology** is **based**, as Bellah himself notes, **on the Hebrew Bible, above all, on the book of Deuteronomy/Devarim.** **American presidents speak of Divine providence** and the **sovereignty of G-d.** They **refer to covenant** and the **moral bonds** by which **societies are sustained.** The **liberty** of which they speak is **biblical rather than libertarian:** a matter **less of rights than responsibilities**, not the freedom to do what one likes, but **the freedom to do what one ought, thus contributing to the common good.** The 'American story' is essentially that which Moses articulated at the end of his life. **America is the promised land to which successive generations of immigrants have come to find freedom from oppression and build, in John Winthrop's famous phrase, 'a city upon a hill.'**

The **story of the Hebrew Bible** is intensely **particularistic.** It tells of **how one people, long ago, experienced oppression and were led to liberty through a long and arduous journey across the desert.** Yet **no story has had greater impact on the political development of the West.** **Moses knew that the events of his time had a significance that went far beyond those days and that people, and that they would eventually become an inspiration to others.** So it came to be. When **black Americans** sang, 'Let my people go,' when **South American liberation theologians** in the 1960's based their work on the **Hebrew Bible**, when **Nelson Mandela** called his autobiography, "**the Long Walk to Freedom**, each was **adopting Israel's story and making it their own.** 'Since the Exodus,' said **Heinrick Heine**, 'Freedom has always spoken with a Hebrew accent.'" (end of quote)

It is wonderful to know that it has been the **custom** of the **U.S. presidents in their inaugural addresses** to "**remember**" the **nation's past**, **give thanks** to the **Almighty** and **rededicate it to the future.** In reading **President Obama's inaugural address**, I saw where he "**remembered**" the **courage of those**

who went before us in battles, in persecution and in hard labor. Unfortunately, I cannot say that I saw him reference **to Whom** we are accountable. Instead, a line referring to our “**patchwork heritage**”:

**“We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this earth.”**

Again, quoting from **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks**:

**“When we forget G-d we begin to lose our humanity. Attempting to be more than merely human, we become less. The result is idolatry – of the nation, the state, the race, the class, the system, the party or the tyrant. Idolatry never dies. It returns, always in a new guise, and always demanding human sacrifice. The prelude to disaster is the thought, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’”**

Some have argued that the **greatest threats to the West** are **Islam** and/or the **Roman system**. Others would argue and say that this is not at all true. The **greatest threat to the West** is the **West itself**. It is in **danger of forgetting its own fundamental Torah-based values**. **Samuel Huntington** points out that the “(west) is a mature civilization on the brink of decay.” He speaks of “**moral decline, cultural suicide, and political disunity.**”

**Rabbi Sacks**:

**“Civilization hangs suspended, from generation to generation, by the gossamer strand of memory. If only one cohort of mothers and fathers fails to convey to its children what it has learned from its parents, then the great chain of learning and wisdom snaps. If the guardians of human knowledge stumble only one time, in their fall collapses the whole edifice of knowledge and understanding.”**

Okay, so what we have been reading is that “**remembering**” is **necessary** for the **spiritual health** of a **society**. Throughout history, **others** have **suggested ethical foundations** for **civilizations** including **duty, happiness for the greatest number, tolerance, compassion, and justice**. Yet, **none** or even all of these are **as great as the power of “remembering”**. **Akavya ben Mehalalel** made a very **wise and Biblical observation**:

**Remember these three things and you will not fall into sin:**

- **Where you have come from**
- **Where you are going to**
- **Before whom you are accountable**

**Rabbi Sacks’ point** was that the **founding fathers** and the **leaders of the United States** often **led** the country through a “**remembrance**” of the **oppression** they came from, and also **established** a “**covenant**” with **similarities** to the “**covenant of Torah**” to which they were **accountable**. In **following this Torah pattern**, the **United States** has been **blessed**. Unfortunately it might also be easy

to see that the **farther from these principles** that the **country strays**, the **more the Almighty will remove His hand of blessing**.

**Today neither Israel nor the United States** are living in a proper **Torah covenantal relationship** with יהוה. Although applied **primarily** to the **Land of Israel**, this verse also applies in **principle** to the **U.S.A.:**

*2 Chronicles 7:14 "if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.*

The **Father's main focus**, however, is certainly **not on the U.S.A.** He is watching His **people, Israel (ALL tribes)** to see if they will **live holy lives**, that He may in turn **bless the nations:**

*Jeremiah 4:1 "If you will return, O Israel," says יהוה, "Return to Me; And if you will put away your abominations out of My sight, Then you shall not be moved.<sup>2</sup> And you shall swear, 'יהוה lives, ' In truth, in judgment, and in righteousness; **Then the nations shall bless themselves in Him, And in Him they shall glory.**"*

The **disciple John** gave **simple directions** for the **end-times assembly:**

*Revelation 3:2 ... I have not found your works perfect before Yah.<sup>3</sup> "**Remember therefore how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent.***

**All nations will be blessed by the Torah covenant** in the **millennial kingdom**. Once again we will be **perfectly reminded of:**

- **Where we have come from**
- **Where we are going to**
- **Before whom we are accountable**

*Isaiah 2:2 Now it shall come to pass **in the latter days** That the mountain of יהוה's house Shall be established on the top of the mountains, And shall be exalted above the hills; And all nations shall flow to it.<sup>3</sup> Many people shall come and say, "**Come, and let us go up to the mountain of יהוה, To the house of the Elohim of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, And we shall walk in His paths.**" For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, And the word of יהוה from Jerusalem.*

**Shabbat Shalom!**

**Ardelle**