

Parshat Eikev: Start-Up Nation or People of the Book

Shana Krakowski Burstein, Class of '28

A few years ago, when I was working in the Tel Aviv Municipality's international department, I was struck by the way that my colleagues and city officials boasted about the city. Their focus was the incredible tech scene and what has been dubbed the "start-up nation." I couldn't always articulate it perfectly, but something about that really bothered me. Why? In truth there is nothing wrong with being successful and innovative, is there?

In parshat Eikev, Moshe continues his powerful speech to Bnei Yisrael before they enter the land. It is full of gravitas. In it he warns of a day when the people experience "ram levavcha" — their hearts will grow haughty. He warns of getting too comfortable and feeling too successful:

When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty (ram levavcha) and you forget your God, who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage; and you say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me (kochi v'otzem yadi asa li et ha'chayil ha'zeh)" (Deuteronomy 8:12-14).

Growing up, I just accepted this final phrase—"My own power and the might of my own hand"— as the pinnacle of ingratitude. But now, reading it with a clean slate, I wonder: why? Why can't people be proud of their own successes? It takes work to build houses and sow fields. Why shouldn't someone be proud when they work hard and meet a goal? On a national level, why not celebrate technological successes?

Another aspect of Moshe's speech looks back to the past. He reminds the people of all the ways they failed in the desert, particularly with the Golden Calf, and that they were "a stiff-necked people." Reading it feels like someone bringing up old grievances when everyone else has moved on. It reads like an argument between a couple, where one side can just not let go of some past events. Wouldn't it be better to focus on a positive future?

There is one verse where Moshe really brings the two themes together:

[God] subjected you to the hardship of hunger and then gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, in order to teach you that a human being does not live on bread alone, but that one may live on anything that God decrees (Deuteronomy 8:3).

Moshe suggests the reason for the hardships and travails was to keep Bnei Yisrael humble and remind them where good fortune comes from.

Rav Benny Lau relates a story that illustrates this point, about his childhood neighbor who was quite wealthy. This neighbor built a gate around his house that was made of old agricultural tools that he used as a young boy in a moshav he grew up in. He did this to remember his humble roots. Perhaps that is what Moshe is doing in the speech—etching the images of our humble beginnings into our collective memory forever.

I think there is an even more powerful and poignant message in this speech. Moshe is giving the blueprint for how to prevent the corruption that so often comes along with power and wealth. It is not just about avoiding ingratitude, and not just nodding to our meek beginnings. Rather there is a risk that success will breed hubris. You may think that you deserve success; that you are somehow more worthy than others. In fact you may start to think that whatever you can get with your own might and power is rightfully yours, that “might makes right.”

This parsha teaches us, in no uncertain terms, that this sense of self-assured superiority is wrong. In a deeply humbling verse, we are told:

It is not because of your virtues and your rectitude that you will be able to possess their country; but it is because of their wickedness that your God is dispossessing those nations before you, and in order to fulfill the oath that was made to your fathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deuteronomy 9:5).

It is not because you are something special that you have this land and prosperity. It is a commitment from God to you, but it is dependent on your part of the deal.

This is why just celebrating “start-up nation” did not sit well with me. It is a celebration of success, but it is missing the purpose. Moshe’s warning is that the nation must remember what to do with that success. We are not more deserving than others but we have a singular charge: “I’taken olam b’malchut Shaddai,” “to fix the world in the image of God’s kingdom” (Aleinu).

Shana Krakowski Burstein grew up in Chicago where she attended a Chabad elementary school and Bais Yaakov High School. Her family background was an intellectual one; open to different perspectives so conversations at the Shabbat table were often religious debates and discussions. From a young age, she wanted to move to Israel and she did so after high school. Professionally in Israel, she worked in the social justice sector, running non profits and working for governmental organizations. She also pursued a degree in social work and a MA in public policy. Since moving to the United States, has been working in Jewish Education and in a local refugee organization.