



Memory and the Divine-Human Partnership

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Two intertwined themes are explored in Parashat Eikev: memory and human agency. What is the connection between these ideas? And how do they work together in our *brit*, our partnership with God?

I. *Ko'ah* vs *hayil*

One verse in our *parashah* seems to challenge human agency and responsibility, suggesting that our success comes not from us but from God:

דברים ח:יח

זָכַרְתָּ אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי הוּא הַנֹּתֵן לְךָ כֹּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת חֵיל:

Deuteronomy 8:18

But remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you the strength (*ko'ah*) to do valor (*hayil*).

How can it be that everything is God's? Do people not have agency and talents? By



suggesting people are not responsible for their success, does this not open up a way of evading responsibility for our actions?

The Ran in his *derashot*¹ suggests an understanding of the mechanism of partnership between humanity and God. He opposes a simplistic, dichotomous reading of the verses—one that claims either everything comes from humans or everything comes from God. He recognizes that the Torah does not erase human agency and power, but rather reframes it. To do this, he distinguishes between the two different words for “strength” in the verse: *ko’ah* and *hayil*. The Ran writes:

דרשות הר"ן י

שאמת שיש באישים סגולות מיוחדות לדבר מהדברים... ולפי זה יהיה אמת בצד מה שיוכל העשיר לומר כוחי ועצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה.

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For it is true that certain individuals possess unique qualities for certain matters... and according to this, it is true in a sense that the wealthy person can say, “My *ko’ah* and the might of my hand have gotten me this *hayil*.”

That is to say, we must acknowledge that human beings are endowed with real power, talents, initiative, and the capacity for action. Yet this is not the complete picture.

For the Ran, *ko’ah* is a person’s innate talent, their natural inclination. *Hayil*, on the other hand, is the finished product—the actual success, wealth, achievement, or result. The Torah

¹ A collection of essays by Rabbeinu Nissim of Gerona (Spain, 14th c.).



does not say that God gives a person hayil or success in a miraculous manner that bypasses human effort, choice or agency, but rather that God is “Who gives you *ko’ah* to achieve hayil.” It follows that human beings indeed produce and do hayil—they are the ones who plow, sow, trade, and initiate—yet the source that makes all of this possible, the essential and vital foundation, is a divine gift.

This insight clarifies the nature of the partnership between God and humanity—a partnership that does not mean God is passive while humans are active, or *vice versa*, but rather that humans are commanded to realize their capabilities to their fullest potential, capabilities vitalised, initiated by God. This is a partnership in which humans are not puppets pulled by strings, but active agents actualizing Divine potential within reality.

This fact carries a further significance: human beings bear full responsibility for their use of *ko’ah* and deeds of hayil, which exist side by side with the recognition that there is a divine source. The partnership between humanity and God does not relieve human beings of responsibility, for without human action, the power that has been granted remains unfulfilled.

II. Memory and Power

One of the central concerns of the Book of Deuteronomy, as I mentioned last week,² is the question of forgetting. Forgetting is closely tied by Sefer Devarim to *ko’ah* and hayil, to the

² See my essay on Parashat Va’Ethanan, “Law After War,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/law-after-war>.



successes and outcomes of human exertion of power.

In Parashat Eikev—and particularly in chapter 8—the Torah describes a life of abundance and prosperity in the Land of Israel and the challenge it poses. The *parashah* opens with an idealized description of the good place to which God brings the people:

דברים ח:ז-ט

⁷כִּי ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ מְבִיאֲךָ אֶל אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה אֶרֶץ נָחֳלִי מַיִם עֵינַת וַתְּהִמֶּת יְצָאִים בְּבִקְעָה וּבְהָרִ: ⁸אֶרֶץ חֹטֶה וּשְׁעָרָה וְגֶפֶן וַתְּאֲנָה וְרִמּוֹן אֶרֶץ זֵית שֶׁמֶן וְדֹבֶשׁ: ⁹אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר לֹא בְּמִסְכָּנָה תֹאכַל בָּהּ לֶחֶם לֹא תִחְסֹר כָּל בָּהּ אֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אֲבִנֶיהָ בְּרֹזֶל וּמַהֲרִיָּה תַחְצֹב נְחֹשֶׁת:

Deuteronomy 8:7-9

⁷For the Lord your God is bringing you into a good land, a land of brooks of water, of fountains and springs, flowing out in the valleys and hills; ⁸a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive oil and honey; ⁹a 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.

This abundance is presented not merely as a blessing, but also as an arena for a spiritual test.

The danger of forgetting lurks at the threshold of abundance:

¹¹הִשָּׁמֶר לָךְ פֶּן תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְבַלְתִּי שָׁמֵר מִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצֹוֶה הַיּוֹם: ¹²פֶּן תֹּאכַל וּשְׁבַעְתָּ וּבָתִּים טֹבִים תִּבְנֶה וְיִשְׁבַּת: ¹³וּבְקֹרֶךָ וּצְאֲנֶךָ יִרְבּוּ וְכֶסֶף וְזָהָב יִרְבֶּה לָּךְ וְכָל אֲשֶׁר לָּךְ יִרְבֶּה: ...

¹¹Beware lest you forget the Lord your God by not keeping God's commandments and rules

and statutes, which I command you today,¹² lest, when you have eaten and are full and have built good houses and live in them,¹³ and when your herds and flocks multiply and your silver and gold is multiplied and all that you have is multiplied...

The forgetting mentioned here is not a loss of memory regarding the past, but a cognitive collapse of the present. When a person is surrounded by abundance in which “you will lack nothing,” they tend to attribute their *hayil* exclusively to themselves. Pride (“and your heart will be lifted up,” 8:14) erases the Divine Presence from reality and creates an illusion of independence, aggressive, forceful independence—and perhaps loneliness: “You will say in your heart, ‘My *ko’ah* and the might of my hand have gotten me this *hayil*.’”

The antidote to this forgetting is the commandment “And you shall remember,” memory which is connected to power. Memory in the Torah is not a nostalgic act of yearning for the past, but a tool for establishing a present of responsible consciousness.³ Though memory turns toward the past (“Who brought you out of the land of Egypt... Who led you through the great and terrible wilderness,” 8:14-16)—its purpose is to construct an understanding of reality in the present: “And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is God who gives you *ko’ah* to do *hayil*, that God may establish God's covenant” (8:18). Memory transforms human action and use of power from a private achievement into an act of partnership in the covenant, rescuing the individual from the notion that everything rests solely on their isolated power. The command “And you shall remember,” therefore, does not turn toward the past nor focus on it; rather, it is a demand to remember in the present. The past is a means of building

³ On this function of memory in the Torah, see the essay of my colleague Shai Held on Parashat Mishpatim, “Turning Memory Into Empathy,” collected in *The Heart of Torah* and available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/turning-memory-empathy>.



contemporary consciousness. Memory is an act that reflects a proper understanding of reality and power here and now. A proper understanding of reality is also the foundation for the future—a future of living in covenant with the Holy Blessed One.

The memory required of us is a constant awareness of the ultimate source from which our capacities flow—even, and perhaps especially, at the peak moments of achieving success.

III. A theology of the exercise of power

The conclusion of chapter 8 presents us with a theology of the exercise of power. Power must be exercised out of memory and for the sake of the covenant. Memory becomes a restraining and directing force. Memory and power are not ends in themselves, but rather a framework that establishes responsibility—each in its own way, and particularly in light of the close connection forged between them in these verses. When a person remembers that the source of their power is divine, their relationship to power transforms from ownership to partnership, from mastery to responsibility. Memory builds humility, it builds partnership in place of “my *ko’ah* and the might of my hand,” and commitment in place of forgetting. The power granted to humanity is not an end in itself, but a means: “that God may confirm God's covenant.” That is to say, every economic or personal success must be translated into expanding goodness and living according to the values of the covenant.

Remembering responsibly means understanding that our present is not disconnected from the past; yet remembering responsibly means not merely recalling what happened, but transforming memory into a bond with God—the source of power who brought us out of the



land of Egypt. Remembering responsibly means acting in a way that establishes and expands a life lived in covenant with the Holy Blessed One.

Memory is tested precisely in times of satiety, when the temptation to retreat into selfishness is at its peak. The demand to remember is a call to take full responsibility for the power in our hands right now—not merely asking “What have I achieved?” but “How am I using the power given to me to build a future of covenantal life?” Memory generates the capacity to exercise power in a measured, value-driven manner that remains mindful of its source, thereby transforming abundance into a sustaining blessing rather than an obstacle of pride.

Ultimately, the Book of Deuteronomy teaches us that memory is the bridge connecting Divine grace with human effort. Abundance in the good land is a time of great responsibility, wherein humanity is called to recognize its partnership with God in all the work of its hands. In this way, the creation of *hayil* becomes divine service in the fullest sense of the word.

