

Re Parashat Eikev – Inspired by an N. Liebowitz Gilayon

The first two Parshiyot of Keriat Shema share a remarkable number of phrases and ideas. Nonetheless, tradition identifies the first Parashah with “acceptance of the yoke of Heaven” and the second with “acceptance of the yoke of commandments”. What justifies this distinction?

Nechamah Liebowitz claims that this can be justified on the basis of both a semantic and substantive distinction. I think the semantic distinction is that the first parashah addresses its audience in the singular, whereas the second does so in the plural. The substantive distinction is the emphasis on consequences in the second parashah, whereas the first has no mention of them. My identification of the second is reinforced by Professor Liebowitz’s follow-up question, which notes a further difference in that the first parashah speaks of loving G-d with “all your possessions” in addition to all your heart and soul, whereas the second mentions only heart and soul. This seems of a piece with the emphasis on positive material consequences – if G-d guarantees material reward, one understands that sacrifice of possessions can only be temporary.

Why, though, should these distinctions generate the classification found in tradition? Answering this question requires addressing a more fundamental question first. In my student Dovid Helfgott’s words, what is the difference between the yoke of Heaven and the yoke of the commandments? What precisely do those terms mean? What would be meaningful about accepting the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven if it didn’t entail obeying His commandments?

I suggest that the last question has it right. Of course one cannot accept G-d’s yoke without accepting His commandments. But accepting the yoke of the commandments, in Jewish terms, means accepting a human yoke as well – the yoke of the authorized interpreters.

For this reason the second parashah, and the second parashah alone, addresses a plural audience. The yoke of the commandments must be accepted by the community as a whole and in the context of the community as a whole. The yoke of the kingdom of Heaven, by contrast, must be accepted individually.

The existence of talk of consequences demonstrates that one cannot be discussing the acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of Heaven. Ramban, in his commentary to Rambam’s Sefer Hamitzvot aseih 1, notes that belief cannot be commanded, as without belief, on what grounds would one recognize the authority of the commandment? Thus G-d would not be justified in punishing people for failure to accept His yoke.

Here we come to another anomalies, and here we move from the framework originally set out by Professor Liebowitz. My anomaly is that both parshiyot, despite the dire threats in the second, speak exclusively of love of G-d, never of fear or awe.

Let me here make a perhaps somewhat far-reaching claim – one cannot accept any yoke whatever out of fear. Fear of punishment, as a motivation, is always subject to a pragmatic calculation. Acceptance of a yoke is unconditional.

Why, then, mention consequences at all in the second parashah? Here I avail myself of the Kantian notion that belief in reward and punishment should never be one’s motivation, but belief in them is entailed by the belief that G-d is just.

To sum up: The mention of reward and punishment is the tip-off that we are dealing with a second-stage yoke. That it is the yoke of commandments is attested by the plural audience. Accepting the yoke of commandments fundamentally involves binding oneself to the legal, rather than one’s own subjective, definition of G-d’s Will.

One further anomaly – the consequences in the second parashah are predicated on a turn to other gods, not mere disobedience of the commandments. This seems to indicate that what is necessary for punishment is that one believe in Divinity, but failure to accept the right deity is in fact culpable.