

The Language of Belief

This Shabbat, we read *Parshat Eikev* on Shabbat morning. A poignant verse from the portion is the command: 'Remember the long journey that God made you travel for these past forty years in the desert.' (Deut 8:2) This is part of a category of mitzvah that is not active. The injunction is to remember. In fact, some devout Jews practice a series of recollections, as dictated by the Torah, every day, after morning services. This injunction is of the same theme – a mitzvah of memory.

Nachmanides understands this to mean that the Torah insists that we recall God's care for us in the desert. God did not abandon us; the righteous do not need to search for bread to survive. This is a specific reminder that God protects the righteous. (see his comments, *ibid*) Experientially, this of course is a very difficult proposition to accept. We see good, decent, righteous people – every day – who suffer. This was, indeed, the great question that Moses posed to God at Sinai. The Talmud understood the request: 'Show me Your glory' as a desire to know the reason why bad things happen to good people. So, the aim of this memory would seem difficult to arrive at – what good will remembering God's care for the righteous if the righteous suffer?

Another way to look at this is posited by Rabbi Elazar Azkari (b1533) from Tzefat. He was born into a family of exiles from the Spanish Expulsion and he wrote a compendium of Mitzvoth, *Sefer Charedim*. In it, he lists this particular commandment under the heading of Torah commandments whose fulfillment is dependent on the heart, rather than our hands.

His explanation of this command – remembering our journey in the desert – is important. To paraphrase: From this command we can learn that if we must remember for generations the acts of kindness God did for our forefathers in the desert, how much more so must every Israelite recall the acts of kindness that God does for us and our people constantly, saving us from the teeth of lions, the wicked ones who are ever-ready to destroy us...we are obliged to recall all the kindness God has shown us since the time of our formation in the womb; this will humble us and bring us back to God in full repentance. (See *Sefer Chareidim*, 1:23)

Life may pose an intellectual challenge to see life as just, but if we take a long view of our life from the time of our formation in the womb – and every step along the way – we can find a guiding, loving hand beside us throughout life. Then, when suffering arrives, which inevitably will – we have a life and a history to nourish our spirit. In this moment, we suffer; in our family/history, we were protected and blessed. God's grace and guidance is not a one-off, but a constant. This is the language that gives the believer strength

Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
Rabbi Menashe East