



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Eikev 5770

By Rachel Farbiarz

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Parshat Eikev continues Moses's exhortation to Israel before his death. The old man cajoles, commands, promises, threatens, warns, woos and reasons. He repeats. With every rhetorical tack he can muster, Moses implores Israel to be faithful to God. Of these, one set of Moses's end-of-life instructions arrests with the thoroughness of its charge:

And you shall set these words on your heart and in your very being and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall become circlets between your eyes....And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and in your gates.¹

To stave off the forgetting that is our daily companion, we are to gird ourselves with amulets about the eyes and hands. Tie, bind and wrap yourselves, Moses commands, in an armor of words, strapped down with leather, contained within four-chambered boxes: testamentary hearts, lewdly beating on our outsides in an effort to keep in mind that which should always-already be there.

And the inscriptions on doorpost and gate: Are they not evidence of our faithless frailty? What sort of pathetic deficit demands that we cover our homes with such scrawl? Our marked posts comprise, it would seem, an architecture of notes to the self. We peg onto our graffitied structures the hope that they can somehow keep central what is vital; that they will barricade us from this forgetting.

And, as if such displays were not enough, we insist upon their constant iteration. Twice daily, in the *shema*, we recite *Eikev's* instructions: wrap yourself; bind yourself; inscribe your posts; etch your gates. Reflexively, obsessively, we beg our feeble selves: *Remember, do not forget: The Lord is your God; there is no other.*

These are surely an amnesiac's habits, littering life with clues to spur recall of its precious content. We are indeed an amnesiac brood: serially inept at remembering those things—sacred, critical, difficult—not before us.

The potency of such reminders is evident in our response to the Gulf oil spill. The constant media focus on the oil-slicked birds, empty beaches and broken tradesmen have made it appropriately impossible for us to avoid the extent of the damage. Months later even, we are riven by the devastation afoot.

But the persistence of our shock at the Gulf spill contrasts sharply with our oblivion to another disaster. Relentlessly over the past half-century, the resource-rich Niger Delta—which supplies 10 percent of American oil imports—has annually suffered roughly the equivalent of an Exxon-Valdez spill.² Yet even as we are riveted by our own disaster, we just can't seem to pay attention to the viscous nightmare that has become a way of life in the Niger Delta.

¹ Dvarim 11:18-20.

² Adam Nossiter, "Far From Gulf, A Spill Scourge 5 Decades Old." *New York Times*, 16 June 2010.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/06/17/world/africa/17nigeria.html>

Significantly, the crux of this disparity is as unexceptional as it is unsatisfying; we are forgetful, distracted beings, preoccupied by what is immediately before us. Our sympathies cling to what we see, to what is proximate and tangible. As one Niger Delta official bemoaned: “We don’t have an international media to cover us, so nobody cares about it. . . .Whatever cry we cry is not heard outside of here.”³

Without regularly confronting images and stories of the Delta’s devastation, we misplace this tragedy among the mess of demands upon our sympathies. We lose track of the suffering of those who bear the brunt of the devastation, who lose sustenance and home. As one community leader described a spill’s effects: “We lost our nets, huts and fishing pots. . . .This is where we fished and farmed. We have lost our forest.”⁴ We in the U.S. often lose sight of the fact that along with this ongoing environmental catastrophe, the Delta suffers through “abject poverty, filth and squalor, and endemic conflict.”⁵ It escapes our memory that these are heartbreakingly man-made disasters, brought about by collusion between corporations and regulators, shoddy pipeline maintenance and sabotage.

In the absence of pictures, stories and sustained international attention, how then are we, as sympathetic global citizens, to stave off our ceaseless forgetting? Surely the power of *Eikev’s* talismans is capacious enough to take on this sort of task. Devotion to God and compassion in a globalized world, after all, demand similar things: cleaving to that which is not immediately present, positing that one’s own actions can make a difference upon an inscrutable other, insisting that something outside one’s immediate surroundings is vitally consequential. They both require leaps—graceless, muscular, ludicrous leaps—of faith.

Thus, as we wrap, bind, inscribe and etch *Eikev’s* words, perhaps we can make room for the memory of a different sort of sacred obligation: *Remember, do not forget*, we might whisper to ourselves, the globe’s many Niger Deltas: long-term, outsized catastrophes whose victims—so often remote and desperately poor—cannot seem to hold our fickle attention. We surely must demand again of our amulets: *Please, do not let me forget*.



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³ *Ibid.*

⁴ John Vidal. “Nigeria’s Agony Dwarfs the Gulf Oil Spill.” *The Observer*, 30 May 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/may/30/oil-spills-nigeria-niger-delta-shell>

⁵ U.N.D.P. *Niger Delta Human Development Report*, 9, 2006. http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/africa/nigeria/name_3368_en.html

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