

D'var Torah: Eikev

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Of the 1,747 words in today's Torah portion, I'd like to spend this time with you discussing just one. The parsha begins with a firm statement that following God's commandments will preserve God's covenant with us. When I started reading the text as translated by different sources, I noticed something I found very interesting. In the first source, the Hebrew was translated as "*because* you follow these commandments..." But in the second source, the same phrase appeared as "*if* you follow these commandments."

At first, I didn't think much of this discrepancy. After all, different biblical translations often adopt variations in style and perspective when translating ancient languages into modern ones. But as I started consulting more and more translations – dozens in all -- I found that about half used *if*, and half used *because*. This is even more striking when you consider that the Hebrew word in question (and the name of the parsha), *eikev*, is almost always translated in dictionaries as "*because of*." So why are there so many *ifs* out there, and does it even matter?

Let's think about how we use these words. We use *if* as a conditional: *If* this, then that. We use *because* as an explanation: *Because* of this, then that. At first glance, they both appear to produce the same outcome, which is to say what effect follows from a given cause. But my sense is that these constructions often have very different connotations in the way we use them.

Because usually implies that something has already happened, or is definitely going to happen. In many cases, it presents the reader or listener with an absolute consequence. "*Because* you overslept, you missed pancakes." "You're going to get wet *because* it's raining." "We're going to get a bonus *because* our profits are up." "Climate change is occurring *because* the ozone layer is depleted."

On the other hand, *if* usually implies that the condition may or may not happen. In many cases, it presents the reader or listener with a choice about what to do next, either by giving options for personal behavior or by providing information that could be used to intervene in future events. "*If* you get up early, I'll make you pancakes." "*If* you don't take an umbrella, you'll get wet." "*If* we exceed our fourth quarter sales goals, we'll get a bonus." "*If* we keep depleting the ozone layer, we'll cause increased climate change."

Each version of the story seems to communicate essentially the same thing about pancakes, rain, bonuses, or climate change. But each is presented in a way with subtle – or perhaps not-so-subtle—overtones.

When I read “*if* you follow these commandments,” I feel like we have a choice. We’ve been presented with an opportunity to control our own destiny. But when I read “*because* you follow these commandments,” I feel like our fate has been preordained. And even though in this case it’s a positive fate – God keeping his promises to us – it seems to provide less motivation for us to actually follow through with our end of the deal than if we thought we might lose God’s covenant if we stray.

If is a word of possibility and potential, of choice and consequence. *Because* is a word of inevitability. *Because* is often focused on explaining the past or the future, whereas *if* often describes a turning point in the present.

I’m a chronic procrastinator. When I was younger, in an effort to get me to do my homework and chores on time, my parents hung a banner in my bedroom for a while with Hillel’s famous saying, “If not now, when.” The message I think my parents wanted to send is that I had the ability to make changes in my life, regardless of the past. They could have said, “*Because* you don’t do your homework, you’ll get bad grades,” or “*Because* you don’t straighten up your room, you won’t get any new toys.” Instead, they communicated the message in a positive and hopeful way.

The traditional nursery rhyme, “Three Little Kittens,” begins, “Three little kittens, they lost their mittens, and they began to cry.” That’s understandable, given their mother’s reaction: “What! lost your mittens, you naughty kittens! Then you shall have no pie.” Or in other words, “*Because* you lost your mittens, you shall have no pie.” But then, “The three little kittens, they found their mittens, and they began to cry.” Why would they cry if they found their mittens? Maybe because their mother had set up the cause and effect as a done deal. The mittens were lost, the pie was withheld, end of story. To the kittens, it didn’t even matter what happened next.

But this time, the mother tried a different approach. “Put on your mittens, you silly kittens, And you shall have some pie.” Or in other words, “*If* you put on your mittens, then you shall have some pie.” The rhyme continues with the kittens donning their mittens and enjoying the pie.

Perhaps this is why so many translators chose to express the message in the parsha *Eikev* by conveying the word *eikev* as *if* instead of *because*. It’s much more effective to get people to do something if they believe they can influence the result, and it lets them feel much more optimistic about the future.

In September of last year, I was out of shape. My life, while busy with many meaningful endeavors, was almost completely sedentary in terms of physical activity. Like many of us, I'd been meaning to get around to working out sometime, but I never did. One day, a friend of mine told me about a new triathlon, in which the bicycle portion of the race would wind around the launch pads at the Kennedy Space Center. As a longtime space nerd who has attended three Space Shuttle launches at Kennedy, this sounded awesome. But just as soon as I got excited, I thought to myself, "Oh well, it's too bad I don't do triathlons." My next thought was, "Then again, I guess I probably could. After all, other people have before."

I started looking into what it would take. A triathlon consists of swimming, biking, and running, so the primary challenges I faced were that I didn't know how to swim and I had never run a mile before in my life. I signed up for a beginner swimming class at my local recreation center, and I began walking more. I hired a triathlon coach, who planned workouts for me that were safe and effective. I got the green light from my doctors. I stopped eating out so much, and I made better choices about what I ate in general. By December, I had learned to swim and I had run my first-ever mile. In February of this year, I went to Disney World with some friends and completed my first 5K. And in May, I completed the Rocketman Triathlon – swimming a quarter mile in Florida's Indian River, biking 36 miles around the Kennedy Space Center, and running 3.1 miles through the streets of Titusville.

I also used the opportunity to raise money for Stop Child Abuse Now of Northern Virginia (SCAN), a wonderful non-profit for which I have volunteered as a Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) for several years. Thanks to generous contributions from friends, including many members of Agudas Achim, I was able to raise more than \$6,000 for SCAN.

So far this year, I've completed a total of five 5K races and two triathlons. I have a dozen more races on my calendar for this year, including another 5K late tonight, a third triathlon next month, and culminating in my first half marathon in December – just one year after my very first mile.

I've lost 40 pounds, but more importantly I've gained a whole new perspective on what I'm capable of doing. For me, it all came down to how I chose to interpret that announcement about the triathlon. Instead of thinking "*Because I'm not in shape, I don't know how to swim, I've never run a mile, and I don't do races, I can't do a triathlon,*" I decided to think, "*If I get in shape and learn to swim and run, I can do a triathlon.*"

Every time I came up with an excuse, I found a way to address it. For me, this included hiring a coach to keep me accountable, telling everyone I knew about my goals so that I had a support network and wouldn't flake out, and collecting tzedakah so that I felt a sense of responsibility to follow through.

As a general rule, I don't really suggest that if you want to get in shape, you should sign up for a triathlon. But it worked for me. You may have another goal entirely – maybe it's fitness-related, but maybe it's something else. Maybe you'd like to learn a language, or write a book,

or get a promotion, or reconnect with an old friend or relative. Whatever your goal is, you can do it. I don't mean that as an empty cliché – I mean *if* you decide you want something, *if* you make a responsible and educated plan, and *if* you follow through, you can really do anything. And *if* there's any way I can help support a goal you have in mind, please let me know and I will.

My 35th birthday was two weeks before my first triathlon, and in recognition of my accomplishments my parents slipped a refrigerator magnet into the card they sent me. "It's never too late to be the person you were meant to be."

Every time a translator is faced with a word, he or she has a choice to make about how to interpret it. For *eikev*, some translators chose *if* and some chose *because*. In life, we are faced with choices every day about how we view the world. When we see a glass of water, we can choose to view it as half empty or half full. This is nothing more than a translation of what's in front of us.

Your goals may not be easy. Mine sure weren't. Getting from the couch to the finish line of a triathlon was the most work I've ever put into anything in my life. But I knew that the outcome would be a function of my effort.

My message to you today is this: Translate your life into *ifs*, and not *because*s. Look for opportunities to view the challenges in your life as possibilities, and not inevitabilities. When attempting to motivate your family, your coworkers, or your fellow congregants, give them a choice instead of decreeing their fates.

Life is a lot more exciting when anything seems possible. Today, on the seventh day, we rest. But tomorrow is the first day of the rest of your life. What will you do with it? And *if* not now, when?

Shabbat shalom.