What Eikev Teaches Us About the Danger of Satisfaction



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A 35-year-old runs his own small fund out of an office in Midtown and lives with his wife and two toddlers in a suburb thirty minutes outside the city. He just had his best financial year, with two wire transfers that cleared last week landing his account in a place he did not expect to see this side of forty. He walked into shul yesterday for Mincha after the second wire cleared and stood for the silent *Amidah* without knowing what to say to God about the year he just had.

Parshat Eikev takes up exactly what the fund manager felt at Mincha yesterday. Moshe spends this chapter warning against exactly this moment—a person full enough to forget who filled him—and then, earlier in the same chapter, commands the corrective: the bracha after eating, said by every Jew at every meal, and the comfortable Jew most of all.

1. The Warning

In Devarim 8:11-14, Moshe spells out the warning in sequence, with the words "when you have eaten and been full, and have built good houses, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have multiplied, you will forget the Lord your God who took you out of Egypt." Rashi elsewhere reads the connecting word at the start of the verse as cause and effect, with fullness producing the forgetting and the forgetting following as the predictable next step rather than as a possibility among many. Moshe's warning targets fullness, not wealth as such. A person can be wealthy and still spiritually hungry, still aware of what wealth cannot give, still davening as if he needs God to fill what wealth cannot supply. The danger Moshe warns against is the next step, the moment the same person becomes satisfied enough that the spiritual hunger goes quiet and the davening becomes habit.

Eli Langer and Zevi Wolman bring Moshe's warning into contemporary terms on an *18Forty Podcast* episode about how we keep our finances kosher. Langer and Wolman are Orthodox finance professionals describing what their daily life as earners looks like when they try to keep Jewish life inside the daily job, and they return to one recurring question, whether the person who makes the money still remembers what made the money possible. Langer and Wolman track the same problem Moshe names: What happens to the rest of a life when financial success becomes the day's organizing fact and no daily practice interrupts the organization?

Daniel Kahneman and Angus Deaton found a secular version of it in a 2010 study, where they found that emotional well-being plateaus around the $75,000 mark in 2010 dollars, with life evaluation continuing to rise past that point but the daily experience of flourishing not rising along with the income.

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Both Parshat Eikev and Kahneman-Deaton point at the same thing from different directions. Moshe warns that once a person is full, his religious life stops moving forward on its own, and the forgetting Moshe describes becomes the predictable next step rather than a one-off risk a person can dismiss. Kahneman and Deaton showed in survey data that daily flourishing in the secular sense plateaus at exactly the income level where survival stops being the question. The reader who pays day school tuition without feeling the pinch and writes generous checks to his shul without thinking twice might assume Moshe is addressing someone with less, but Moshe places the warning precisely on the person who has already done all of those things effortlessly.

2. The Psychology of Comfort

What specifically about fullness corrodes religious life is the next question Moshe takes up, and Sebastian Junger in *Tribe* describes one answer in secular terms. Junger spent years with combat veterans returning from war to comfortable American civilian life, and what he found is that the veterans describe a flatness in affluent modernity, a daily absence of the pressure that combat had applied for free. What Junger describes in secular terms is what our parsha calls forgetting. When scarcity ends, the religious life that used to wake a person every morning loses its grip, and the comfortable American Jew loses it the same way Junger's veterans did.

The fund manager's grandfather came from Lodz in 1938 and worked himself to exhaustion as a tailor in Brooklyn so his three children could go to day school. The grandfather's davening had urgency the grandchildren cannot replicate, because the grandfather's life was not full and the connection between God and survival was direct in a way the grandchildren's life will never make direct. Parshat Eikev reads to the grandfather as a description of the life he was building toward, not as a warning about the life he was inside.

Moshe gave the comfortable Jew an institutional answer to the grandfather's missing urgency, and Ari Bergmann, on the *18Forty Podcast* on giving wealth a rest, describes that answer in the *shemittah* year. Bergmann teaches Talmud and finance, and he describes *shemittah* as the seven-year cycle that requires the wealthy person to release debts and set the wealth down—an institutional acknowledgment that nothing the person built was ever fully his to keep. The grandchildren of Lodz immigrants need this kind of institutional structure precisely because the urgency that animated their grandfather has been replaced by comfort.

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Junger's veterans, the grandfather's davening, and Bergmann's shemittah each name a different piece of the same problem. Modernity removes the scarcity that made the grandfather's davening land, the grandfather embodied the religious life scarcity produced, and Moshe gives the comfortable Jew *shemittah* as the structure that recovers what scarcity used to do for free. The reader who pushes back that hardship is not virtuous and that no one should want to be poor and afraid is not wrong, and Moshe agrees, since the chapter is not asking the grandchildren to engineer hardship but to find a different route to what the grandfather's hardship produced as a side effect. The next verse Moshe speaks names that route.

3. My Strength and the Might of My Hand

Moshe puts the failure into the comfortable Jew's own mouth, "and you say in your heart, my strength and the might of my hand made me this wealth." Sforno reads the words as a psychological diagnosis, the moment a person who has built something looks back at the building and credits himself for the whole project. Moshe places the warning right before the corrective, so a reader who knows the chapter knows the corrective is coming and can recognize the failure in his own daily voice before Moshe supplies the fix. Moshe is showing the reader the sentence the reader will say to himself, in his own first-person voice, if he forgets.

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In *Behave*, Stanford neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky describes the neuroscience that produces exactly the sentence Moshe names. Sapolsky argues that success shifts a person's mental model of agency, so the successful person increasingly experiences his outcomes as his own production and treats luck, structure, and other people as smaller factors than they actually were. What Sapolsky describes the brain producing in the lab, Moshe already put into the comfortable Jew's first-person voice 3,000 years earlier.

What Sapolsky describes happens inside one person. Haym Soloveitchik, on the *18Forty Podcast* episode on how modernity changed our relationship to God, describes the same loss spreading across a whole Modern Orthodox community over generations. He argues that the connection to God an Orthodox community used to inherit effortlessly has been replaced by a connection a Modern Orthodox Jew now has to argue himself into at every step, because modernity dissolved the older carriers. In the community the fund manager's grandfather grew up in, someone would have called him on the strength-and-might words before he finished the sentence. In the suburb the grandchildren live in, no one is listening hard enough to catch the words at all.

Moshe, Sapolsky, and Rabbi Dr. Soloveitchik converge on the fund manager standing for Mincha after the wires cleared. Devarim 8:18 immediately corrects 8:17 by telling the comfortable Jew to remember the Lord his God, for it is He who gives the strength to make wealth. The chapter is not asking the reader to deny his work but to remember the gift inside which the work was possible. The private failure has a public shadow, and Moshe turns next to what fullness does to a whole community.

4. The Social Cost of Forgetting

The private failure Moshe names at 8:17 has a public shadow that scales across whole communities, and Robert Putnam at Harvard documented that shadow in *Bowling Alone*. Putnam tracked dozens of indicators across the second half of the 20th century, from PTA membership to neighborhood gatherings, and he found a steady thinning of the communal infrastructure that holds a comfortable society together. Putnam's civic data is the public version of what our parsha names privately, that when private affluence rises, the institutions that produce mutual obligation thin alongside the rising wealth.

The fund manager has a friend in the same shul, a peer who lost his finance job and has not found another at the same level. The friend has been spending the year back inside the kind of financial worry he had not felt since his first job out of business school, and the religious life that comfort had quietly thinned has come back in the months his comfort fell apart. The friend is in pain financially and clearer religiously, and Parshat Eikev reads to him now in a way it had not in years, as a description of the territory he had been living inside without seeing the ground beneath his feet.

Shani Taragin names what the friend's job loss accidentally returned. She argues that a Jew who works hard at observance finds his religious meaning inside the struggle itself, and a Jew for whom observance has become too easy loses the meaning along with the struggle. The Modern Orthodox life Eikev warns against has become comfortable in exactly the places where struggling with observance used to give a person his religious meaning.

The fullness that the parsha warns against is a public problem and a private problem at the same scale. No one should engineer hardship to get his davening back, and the parsha isn't asking him to. It's asking him to do something different: to hold the difficulty Rabbanit Shani describes so his own religious life keeps producing the meaning that fullness threatens to drain. The communal infrastructure Putnam tracks holds together as a side effect of individual Jews holding their own meaning, not the other way around.

5. The Practical Antidote

Devarim 8:10 commands the bracha after eating in the same chapter as the warning, “and you shall eat and be satisfied and bless the Lord your God for the good land He has given you.” Ramban reads the commitment plainly, that the obligation falls immediately after the eating Moshe has just described. The chapter that names the failure at 8:17 commands the daily corrective seven verses earlier, and the corrective puts an acknowledgment of God in the slot where 8:17 would otherwise have the comfortable Jew crediting himself for the meal. *Bentching* is the chapter’s answer to the moment a comfortable Jew finds himself with nothing to say to God after a meal he barely noticed.

Dr. Robert Emmons at UC Davis spent two decades running peer-reviewed studies on gratitude practice, and what his lab found is that daily rituals of acknowledgment produce measurable shifts in well-being, sleep, social connection, and stress recovery. Emmons is not arguing the rituals change what is happening in the world. Emmons is arguing the rituals change the person performing the rituals, in directions that show up on standard measures of human flourishing. *Birkat Hamazon*, three times a day for a person who eats three meals, is the kind of daily ritual Emmons’s data finds reshaping the practitioner over time.

Senator Joe Lieberman, on the *18Forty Podcast* on the gift of Shabbos, described what a structural Jewish practice did to a Jewish life over decades. Lieberman kept Shabbat through Senate sessions, presidential campaigns, and 40 years in American public life, and what he described was a weekly architecture that held the rest of the week together when nothing else in his career would have produced that result. *Birkat Hamazon* does at three meals a day what Lieberman described Shabbat doing one day a week, with a structured acknowledgment landing more often and shaping the *bentcher* over thousands of repetitions.

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Tomorrow at lunch the fund manager will sit down with his wife and the two toddlers, take a bite of the sandwich he packed, and recite the bracha Devarim 8:10 commands at the end of the meal. The reader who pushes back that he already *bentches* most days and that the words do not feel like much when he is mumbling them is asking the right question. Eikev's answer is that the bracha reshapes the *bentcher* whether he feels the weight at any given meal or not, because the practice gathers across thousands of *bentchings* what no single *bentching* can produce on its own. Tomorrow the fund manager will either say the bracha consciously after the year he just had, or he will mumble it without thinking about what he is saying, or he will skip it altogether and decide he did this on his own. Eikev was written to keep him from choosing the second or the third.

Questions for Reflection

1. **Which line of Birkat Hamazon, said honestly tonight, would land hardest for you?**
2. **What did your grandparent's davening sound like that yours does not?**
3. **What would change in your daily practice if you held the difficulty of observance as part of how Jewish life forms you?**

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