



TEMPLE  
BETH-EL  
OF GREAT NECK

Inspire Through Purpose | Be Known By Love

**No Atheists in Foxholes** - Shabbat Eikev 5783  
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- Did you hear about the evangelical atheist? She went door to door with a book full of blank pages.
- How does an atheist have her hair done? In big bangs!
- Why can't dyslexic agnostics fall asleep? They stay awake all night wondering if there really is a Dog.
- Why can't atheists solve exponential equations? Because they don't believe in higher powers.
- Why did the atheist throw her watch out the window? She wanted to see if it was designed intelligently enough to evolve into a bird; because, you know, time flies.
- The ironic thing about atheists is they're always talking about God.

My grandfather was fond of the saying, "There are no atheists in foxholes." What he meant is that everything can be in doubt until the bullets fly and the bombs drop. Present people with a crisis, and watch the pews fill up with penitent and repentant alike; but make peace, and the God business tends to dry up a bit. That's not to say faith is expedient, but ask yourself, even without God in the equation, "What happens if one simply *follows* the law?" Is one rewarded? If one *breaks* the law, they are likely to be charged with a crime—perhaps indicted and even punished. And as we know, perhaps not.

So what happens if we ignore God's commandments? Will we really disappear from the face of the earth? This week's portion challenges us who ask such questions. No, not the ones about atheists, but at the same time, sort of, yes to those too. This week's Torah portion, Eikev, contains warnings against humans believing their wealth, welfare and wisdom are of their own making. *Eikev* means "if you follow" and begins by Moses outlining more commandments to follow and warnings of what will happen if they aren't followed.

"Take care, lest when you have eaten and are filled, and when you have built fine houses and inhabited them, and when your flocks and your herds have increased, and when your silver and gold—and all that you possess—is multiplied, you be lifted up in your heart, and forget the Lord your God."

"Say not my own might, or the strength of my right hand has acquired me all this power, but remember always the Lord your God who gives you the might to acquire power." It seems pretty straightforward, familiar even. Material acquisition is often accompanied by spiritual acquiescence. Who needs God when times are good? Why depend on God's power when you have a Ferrari or a Tesla? After all, there's a lot of power under that hood, even if it's an electric vehicle.

In this week's portion, Moses continues his discourse to the Children of Israel along these lines, admonishing them to follow God's commandments and warning against their abrogation. And yet, prophecy has already foretold this very thing—that our ancestors would stop following the law, observing the Sabbath and be cast out from the land as a result. Many of these things are still happening and, admittedly, things look OK.

Poor Moses! He warns and warns, and it seems so futile. Is nobody listening? Won't they soon forget? I feel his pain. I can relate, even. The rabbis and I stand up to preach each week, knowing our words will be lost as soon as congregants step into the parking lot. I'm not offended, really. It's why we send them out via email shortly thereafter!

If the Eternal wants us to remember and do all these things, why not set up a Facebook page or a Twitter account—or maybe a YouTube channel? I know, we have those; but if God wants us all to follow these laws, why limit them to those who show up here week after week? Is God's goal really to limit knowledge of God's words to those who bother to show up to temple now and again? Must we hear the words being read aloud for them to pierce the veil of our stubbornness?

Why not whisper the words of the commandments into our ears each day with a still, small voice? That could be more effective; or perhaps printing the words on money, since some of us handle \$20 bills more frequently than verses of Torah.

The third sentence of this week's parashah begins with a familiar word in a less familiar conjugation. It begins, "*Va'ahavcha*" (and he will love you); bearing a similarity to the prayer included in last week's parashah, *V'ahavta* (and you shall love.) The latter pertains to how we are to demonstrate that love: with our hearts, our minds and our might. According to Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, or Nachmanides, the former means that by fulfilling God's commandments thusly and thereby showing our love out of a love for God, God will love you as well.

It is possible also that *va'ahavcha* is transitive, that God will cause even those judged for punishment to love those imposing judgment. "You will not be hated because of [what you have done to] them. *And He will bless thee*, that *no evil shall befall thee* because of the judgment [you have rendered]. *And He will multiply thee*, that you will not be diminished because of the death of the transgressors, even if many are slain such as the people of an apostate city."

That may feel like a stretch, but what it says to me, and apparently Nachmanides, is that there's room for everyone in God's love—the righteous, the punished, that casual believer, the occasional atheist and even the heretic. It's a radical theology: That even those who don't believe in God can be subject to God's love and, despite the possible punishment for apostasy, entitled to forgiveness—heady stuff as we head into the penitential season.

Let's return to Moses and his concern over the Israelites forgetting God's laws as they prepare to cross the Jordan. This looms so large for him; he recalls smashing of the tablets of the covenant upon seeing the golden calf. And I can relate, for aren't we all still worshiping golden calves of some sort or another: the newest iPad, a new handbag, something shiny and new and physical that alleviates our anxieties? After all, that's easier than connecting with a deity we neither see nor hear.

But none of those things cleanse us, even if we don't believe in the notions of sin, blessing and forgiveness through a deistic lens. Perhaps atheists, it seems, are entitled to, and need, a higher power, even if only as a foil for their own beliefs. Remember what Nachmanides indicates: There's room for everyone in this equation.

I'd like to share a story. David, an atheist and a Jew, is walking through the forest when he is attacked by a huge grizzly bear. "Dear God!," he screams, "Help me!" The bear stops in its tracks, and a booming voice rings out: "All your life you've said you don't believe in me, slandered my name, and now you want my help?" "I realize my request is poorly timed," replies David, "but in your mercy, would it be possible for you to make this bear a Jew?" "Of course!" replies God. The bear closes its eyes and clasps its paws in prayer and recites: "*Hamotzi lechem min haaretz. ...*"

I don't mean to belittle the beliefs of atheists nor to guilt those not in attendance into coming more often—though I'd be happy to see you more often. Rather, I wish to point out that we often find ourselves at a loss for how to talk to the Eternal at precisely the moment we need to have those conversations. When we are lost and searching for something to help us guide our way through the storms of life is perhaps not the optimal time to read the instruction manual of the life raft.

If we wait until we are about to cross the Jordan, are facing a hungry bear or however we find ourselves in moments of transition or crisis, we may well find ourselves about to become the meal of circumstance. Faith takes work. It isn't easy. How are we to expect that when we show up on the High Holidays for the first time in many many weeks, or even months, the unfamiliar words and rituals will be relevant or hold any meaning?

When we haven't had the casual watercooler conversations with the Creator, it's harder to do so following a cardiac incident, a car accident or cancer. Of course, this sounds a little self-serving and like a plug for participating in temple—and, I confess, it is. Is that really a bad thing, though? Like Moses, I want to encourage you before we cross into the new year, to prepare yourselves for what's coming. The process of *t'shuvah* starts now; and no matter your beliefs or level of religiosity, remember Grandpa Joe's words: There are no atheists in foxholes.

These six weeks before the High Holidays and in the second Shabbat of consolation, avail yourself of an opportunity. Read the words of our prayer book, even if only the transliteration or the translation. Sing the melodies just a little louder. Your neighbors won't care and if you do; tell them the cantor said it's OK to sing off-key. Come to Torah Study, or minyan, on Saturday morning. Would it kill you? It probably won't. It probably won't kill if you don't come, but a hungry grizzly bear might—so you may as well. ***Shabbat Shalom!***