



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

## Today's Torah

*Jews have always been a community drawn together by virtue of Torah. No matter where you may be, we welcome you to the Ziegler community through Today's Torah e-mail.*

*To view this email online, please visit:*

<https://www.aju.edu/ziegler-school-rabbinic-studies/our-torah>.

**Shabbat Ekev**  
**August 24, 2019 - 23 Av 5779**



**By: Dr. Tamar Marvin**  
**Adjunct Professor**  
**Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies**  
**American Jewish University**

### Are we architects of our own fate?

Torah Reading: Deuteronomy 7:12-11:25

Haftarah Reading: Isaiah 49:14-51:3

A central theme of Parashat Eikev is contingency: that a person's fate is predicated on their actions, and the future is not yet written. A core problem occupying medieval philosophers, including the classical Torah commentators, the question of causality continues to fascinate—and elude—us today. In our own time, it tends to be scientists who explore the way that cause and effect play out in time. Physicists debate the linearity of time, with some advancing the block universe theory in which causality is an illusion created by human cognitive processes. Biologists examine the delicate interplay of volition and neural firing, demonstrating that neurons can initiate movement before there is any cognitive sign of intent. The emergent conclusion is that free will may be a quirk of our human perspective, just as our sense of a stable and sensible physical world is belied by the laws of quantum mechanics.

Eikev, meanwhile, insists that free will is at the heart of the covenantal relationship between the Jewish people and God. The opening word of the parashah, *eikev*, which we use to refer to it, is telling.

*Eikev* literally means “on the heels of”; *akev*, the noun, means the heel of the foot, *ikvot* means footprints, and *Yaakov*, from the same root, means “he follows,” connoting the patriarch’s birth order in relation to his twin, Esav. In other words, the word *eikev* uses concrete physicality to express abstract causality. The parashah thus opens with, “It shall be, *following* your hearing of these rules and your keeping and doing of them, that the Lord your God will keep the covenant with you that God pledged to your ancestors.” There is an integral relationship here between human act and Divine act.

Further into the parashah, Ibn Ezra and Ramban consider the purpose of Divine tests to an omniscient God. Devarim 8:2 reads, “You shall remember the entire way that the Lord your God caused you to walk these forty years in the wilderness in order to afflict you and test you (*nassotkha*) so as to know what is in your hearts, whether you will keep God’s commandments or not.” But doesn’t God have perfect knowledge of this already? Why was such suffering necessary?

Ibn Ezra’s comment here merely says, “I have already explained this.” If we turn back in his commentary, all the way to Avraham’s sacrifice, we find that Ibn Ezra calls knowledge derived from Divine testing a great secret, known only to God, “the knower of all unknowns.” There he suggests that God’s testing of Avraham—*nissah*, the same verb used in our verse—is for the purpose of giving Avraham a reward. It is, in other words, a cultivated opportunity for a human to exercise free will. From his allusion to this explanation in parashat Eikev, we may deduce that Ibn Ezra sees the suffering of the wilderness generation as an opportunity they were given.

Ramban has no quarrel with Ibn Ezra’s approach, coming to the same conclusion. However, Ramban brings in a fascinating text to illuminate this verse. In Birkat Hamazon, one of our most frequently recited prayers, we are left to grapple with the statement (taken from Tehillim), “I once was young and have now grown old, and have yet to see a righteous person left to suffer, or their children go hungry.” But human history, and perhaps our own experiences, show us that innocent people suffer—that hunger is a sociopolitical condition, not a moral one. Here Ramban suggests that the verse speaks specifically of the wilderness generation. God could have led the people through inhabited areas, Ramban points out, but instead caused them to walk in the wilderness. God brought down manna, only to have the desert heat melt it away—and to renew the miracle, faithfully, consistently, over forty long years. Ramban writes, “God brought them through this trial (*nissayon*—notably, the modern Hebrew word for ‘experience’) because through it God knows that they will keep the commandments for eternity.” Trial—experience—is not necessary to God, but it may be needed by humans, Ramban suggests. For both Ramban and Ibn Ezra, then, the human experience of causality is a vector of meaning. Whatever the nature of time, our experience of its unfolding matters.

---

**Tamar Marvin, PhD**, is a scholar of medieval Jewish intellectual history and adjunct professor at American Jewish University and Hebrew Union College-JIR, Los Angeles. She also develops and teaches full-credit online courses for the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York. Her research centers on the culture of the medieval Jewish communities of Occitania (Provence) and she is particularly interested in the cultural creativity generated by new systems of meaning – Maimonideanism and Qabbalah—that emerge from a multiplicity of intra- and intercommunal contacts in this crossroads region, situated between Ashkenaz and Sefarad, the Latin West and the Islamicate Mediterranean.

---



# Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

OF AMERICAN JEWISH UNIVERSITY

Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies  
American Jewish University  
15600 Mulholland Drive  
Bel Air, CA 90077  
310-440-1213  
[www.aju.edu/ziegler](http://www.aju.edu/ziegler)

Share this email:



[Manage](#) your preferences | [Opt out](#) using **TrueRemove®**

Got this as a forward? [Sign up](#) to receive our future emails.

View this email [online](#).

15600 Mulholland Dr.  
Los Angeles, CA | 90077 US

This email was sent to [michelle.starkman@aju.edu](mailto:michelle.starkman@aju.edu).  
*To continue receiving our emails, add us to your address book.*

**emma**<sup>®</sup>