

Can't talk to you without talking to me

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Written in memory of my cousin Daniel Kale

When I first started Eikev, I found myself repeatedly returning to the beginning to recontextualize the parasha. In Eikev, Moses addresses the Israelites, recounting what happened at Mount Sinai and explains the rewards they will reap when they honor God's command and the punishments they will suffer if they disobey. This is a text that deals with covenant and the conditions for its fulfillment. The parasha begins:

"And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, the ETERNAL your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant made on oath with your fathers:

[God] will favor you and bless you and multiply you—blessing your issue from the womb and your produce from the soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock, in the land sworn to your fathers to be assigned to you."

Indeed, upon further reflection, who Moses is addressing strikes me as more complex than meets the eye. He relays God's word so faithfully that at quick glance, it could read like direct speech: *"You shall faithfully observe all the Instruction that I enjoin upon you today"*. There could well be a blurring of roles, between his relationship to God, as messenger and his relationship to the Israelites. It would also make sense that he's speaking to God, in an effort to demonstrate his faithfulness towards Them. I wonder too if he's also tending to his relationship with himself.

We can explain and justify our actions to others, maybe a divine presence, and tend to an ongoing conversation with ourselves as well. In my encounters with disability and pain, constructing and adapting a narrative as I go of my body's story of pain, is needed for administrative bodies, medical professionals, friends, family, some potential employers, other encounters as called for and myself, catching us up on where I've been. This account can also feature some connectors in this text with "eikev" roughly translating to "consequently," and others; "or", "therefore", "because."

These words aid in structuring events and might also sound familiar to someone with chronic pain. “If I stay out late tonight, I’ll be unable to go to the doctor tomorrow morning” “if I go to both parties this week-end, I will deplete and not recover for the week ahead.” And we explain the rewards we will reap when we honor our covenant to our bodies: “by going to bed now with a sudoku puzzle, I’ll replenish fully and be up in the morning with minimal strain”, “thanks to my weekly gym sessions, I can enjoy being outside all day today with little distress.” At this moment I am luckily reaping the energetic rewards since I began gym and posture realignment coaching that has reinvigorated my physical health and social life. I have experienced the range of consequences and adjusted, rewrote my body’s story and my covenant.

To return to the question of who Moses is speaking to, these connectors are worthy of our reflection. Are we explaining ourselves to offer legitimate information, tend to bonds, to clarify events for ourselves, and/or are we pleading with able-bodied conditions, for a moment of reprieve? Are we trying to alleviate the burden of our own ableist shame and embarrassment of our limitations? To constantly tend to the narrative of the body, is it to retrieve a form of control? What is the line between justification and explanation? Is it a line? This line might vary from person to

person and needs to be approached with flexible care, much like the art of honoring our bodies. I wrestle with all of this, going from an able-bodied thirty year old to someone with chronic sciatica, who scrambled to recover a more diminished social life. I've gone in different directions in order to honor my covenant to my body, from avoiding any effortful outings and all loosely defined "risks" (due to incorrect capacity assessment and leftover shock from some brutal recoveries), to allowing the yearning for a full life take the wheel, in an effort to relieve the social costs by stretching beyond my limits. In my ongoing dialogue to myself, I recall the kind and sage insights of my physiotherapist, who tended to my distress and fears that I dishonored my body's covenant. With warmth and reason he would reply, "it made sense that you stayed out in the cold to see your friend because you were more isolated in the winter and you hadn't seen her in so long," "you wanted to take that risk because you needed to move, you were tired of laying around inside", and more, with repetition. He offered warmth, repeated reasoning in efforts to soothe various of distress.

Through his approach, I may therefore identify a model of loving thy neighbor as thyself and in so doing he lives by:

“(…) walk only in divine paths, to love and to serve the ETERNAL your God.”

He helps me rewrite my covenant and ongoing conversation with myself. As expressed in the following Grateful Dead lyric that leapt out at me in writing this piece,

“Can’t talk to you without talking to me”

In talking to the Israelites, to God, Moses may be talking to himself too, perhaps in a willingness to recenter following the disobedience of the Israelites, in an effort for all to recommit. What I do take from this lyric and how it colors my understanding of holy living, is its belief in the impossibility (“**can’t**”) of a singular dialogue. We are tied and engage in multiple, ongoing conversations as we nourish our bond to one another. To love God is to love myself, to love me is to love my neighbor, perhaps. When we break those covenants break which I personally perceive to be an inevitability in the process (as the books of the Talmud attest to many depictions of the struggles to honor God’s commandments), perhaps some flexibility, some warmth, structured reasoning and introspection may aid in writing the covenants anew and in nourishing our inextricable bonds.

Joanna teaches English, writes, does art and is trying to live a more aligned life (!)