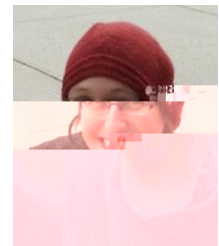




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Shabbat Ekev
August 24, 2019 - 23 Av 5779



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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, אמר, which we use to refer to it, is telling.

literally means “on the heels of”; , the noun, means the heel of the foot, means footprints, and , from the same root, means “he follows,” connoting the patriarch’s birth order in relation to his twin, Esav. In other words, the word uses concrete physicality to express abstract causality. The parashah thus opens with, “It shall be, your hearing of these rules and your keeping and doing of



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