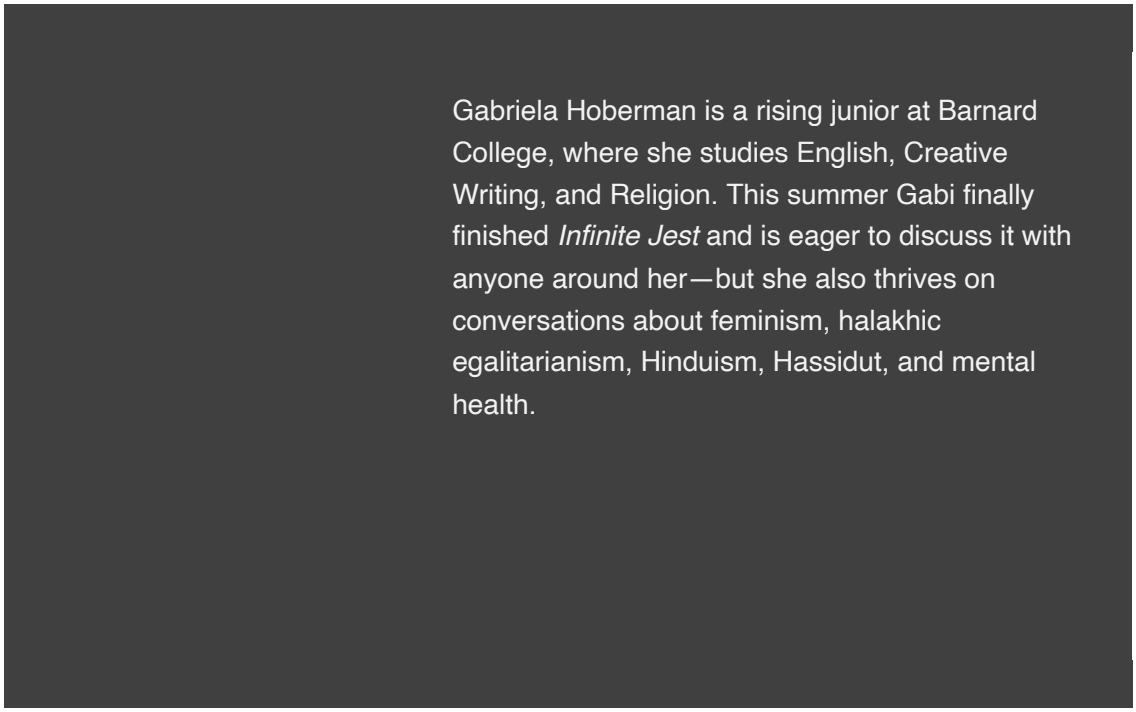
Dvar Torah for Parshat Eikev

Love Can Cure a Stiff Neck

Gabriela Hoberman '12 | BronfmanTorah | Eikev 2016



Gabriela Hoberman is a rising junior at Barnard College, where she studies English, Creative Writing, and Religion. This summer Gabi finally finished *Infinite Jest* and is eager to discuss it with anyone around her—but she also thrives on conversations about feminism, halakhic egalitarianism, Hinduism, Hassidut, and mental health.

As the summer's ending I've been trying desperately to hide from the beginning of the semester, which despite my unconscious efforts keeps lumbering darkly closer. School is hard—intellectually, religiously, emotionally—and even though I love my time on campus, sometimes it's hard to feel that I want to return. Transitions are terrifying.

In Parshat Eikev, Moses is still beginning a very long speech. After years of wandering the desert, the people are standing at the edge of a precipice, about to

enter the land they've heard about (and dreamed about, and complained about) their entire lives, and Moses is telling them what this new land will be like: how drastically their relationship with God will change once they enter. In the desert, he says, God made the "stiff-necked" people suffer with miraculous and unnatural food from the heavens in order to test them and see if they'd follow the commandments; in the land, he says, God will grant prosperity to a land with overflowing but naturally-cultivated produce as long as the people follow the commandments.

It's again a terrifying transition: the people who've grown up in a desert with everything divinely provided now must learn to support themselves, while still remembering that all of their success depends only on their obedience to the divine commandments. I can imagine the people quaking before their leader, but reading this text I also squirm. God causing suffering, God counting out commandment and punishment: that God feels cold, cruel, calculating, that doesn't feel like a God I want to follow, like the God I try to speak to every day. Later on in the parasha Moses continues to illustrate the relationship that will follow between God and the people:

> What does the Lord your God demand of you? Only this: to revere the Lord your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul… Cut away, therefore, the thickening about your hearts and stiffen your necks no more. For the Lord your God is God supreme and Lord supreme, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who shows no favor and takes no bribe, but upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing—You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. (10:12-19)

New immigrants dancing the Hora at Zion Gate in Tel Aviv Harbour, 1939. Photo House Pri-Or.

This feels like a different relationship entirely—one that depends not on dry action or painful obedience but on emotion, on giving, on supporting, on openness to others. It brings to my mind Buber's words:

> Love is a cosmic force. For those who stand in it and behold in it, men emerge from their entanglement in busy-ness; and the good and the evil, the clever and the foolish, the beautiful and the ugly, one after another become actual and a You for them; that is, liberated, emerging into a unique confrontation. Exclusiveness comes into being miraculously again and again—and now one can act, help, heal, educate, raise, redeem. Love is a responsibility of an I for a You: in this consists what cannot consist in any feeling —the equality of all lovers, from the smallest to the greatest and from the blissfully secure whose life is circumscribed by the life of one beloved human being to him that is nailed his life long to the cross of the world, capable of what is immense and bold enough to risk it: to love man. (I and Thou translation by Walter Kaufmann, p66-67)

For Buber, love, the I-You relationship, is fluid, a movement between two people. No one can be objectified, can be described in static, bounded terms, can be reduced to categories or titles: people emerge from their routines and confront each other, and face the other as equals obligated in supporting each other.

A teacher of mine, Rabbi Yehoshua Weissberg, often repeats a Hassidic teaching. He asks, *why do I sometimes feel like God is miles away and sometimes like God is right beside me?* He compares it to the image of a parent teaching a child how to walk: the parent lifts the child onto their feet, and then lets go and takes a few steps back. The child must learn to walk towards their parent—and as soon as they do, the parent will lift their child up and take a few more steps back. Like the parent, in teaching the people God pulls away for people to grow closer—and every perceived distance is actually the opportunity for more growth, more closeness.

And with these words I find this relationship of love and giving at the core of the others. In the desert, God tests God's people, in the Land, God rewards and

punishes God's people, but in both places the relationship between people and God is mediated by giving. In motions perhaps cruel or cold God gave the man and will give the fruit of the land, but in motions of love we are told "you too must befriend the stranger," like God does by "providing him with food and clothing."

Loving God requires us to cut away the blocks and hardness around the heart, to break out of our natural, stiff positions, to emerge from our routines and the simple actions that make up our lives: to pause from the work of the day and see behind our prosperity the Other that perhaps grants it. Any kind of relationship implies commitment, expectations—I expect my family to remember my birthday, I hope my friends wave when they see me—and the relationship between people and God also carries expectations, commandments. But in the parasha's later verses, those commandments include responsibilities towards other people, requirements to support those around us. We cannot love God without recognizing God in God's other creations; we may not be able to give to God but we can and must give to those other creations. Rabbi Shai Held likes to emphasize that to love is to give, that one cannot love another without giving of themselves to that other—and so in love with God we must act, "help, heal, educate, raise, and redeem" those around us.

Transitions are terrifying; feeling a distance between oneself and others, between oneself and what one knows, between oneself and God is terrifying. But as I'm looking towards starting another semester, and as the people look towards a transformation in their relationship with God, Moses commands the people to love. *Stop stiffening your necks*, he says, *remove the hardness and thickness around your hearts, the stubbornesses that lead me to insist on only one kind of situation, that push me to objectify my surroundings*. The underlying relationship between the people and God and each other is a relationship fluctuating and flowing, changing and constant and growing. It continues despite changes in locale and in food, despite changes in years and learning, despite changes in suffering and tests and reward and punishment and all-nighters; in fact it grows through those hardships, those terrifying moments, those distances and anxieties. I can fall back on that, fall back on those around me and on God, look for support and moreover give support and love—and continue to grow and change and love as I move through life.

Continue the conversation. Send Gabriela your thoughts:
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