Eternal Torah: Thoughts for Parashat Ekev

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Angel for Shabbat, Parashat Ekev

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

“And I took hold of the two tables and cast them out of my two hands, and broke them before your eyes” (Devarim 9:17)

In this week’s parasha, Moses recounts the episode when he came down the mountain with the tablets of stone and found the Israelites worshiping a golden calf. He cast the tablets to the earth and shattered them.

A Hasidic gloss on this episode notes that the stone was smashed to pieces…but the letters floated in the air. Moses could destroy the physical tablets but their spiritual power endured.

This interpretation harks back to the Talmudic description of the death of Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon who was executed by the Romans (Avoda Zara 17b). During the Hadrianic persecutions, it was forbidden to teach Torah in public; but Rabbi Hanina ben Teradyon continued to gather large crowds to impart the teachings of Torah. He was arrested and condemned to death. The Romans wrapped him in a Torah scroll and set him and the scroll on fire. But before he succumbed to the flames, Rabbi Hanina called out: “the parchment is on fire but the letters are floating in the air.” It was—and is—impossible to destroy the spirit and meaning of Torah.

Over the centuries, and including our own time, the Torah has been subjected to vilification, desecration, and even threats of physical burnings. The enemies of Torah do not realize that the Torah will long outlast their evil. Any act against Torah is, in fact, against the best interest of humanity.

A source of anti-Jewish hatred, I believe, is the deep-seated feeling that Jews represent the ideals of Torah. The haters resent Jews who symbolize—knowingly or unknowingly—the commitment to righteousness, morality, respect for God and for fellow human beings. The haters of Jews—consciously or subconsciously—are also haters of God. They don’t want to be held morally

accountable to God. But whatever they do to Jews or to the Torah, the spirit of Torah will endure.

The great Victorian writer, Matthew Arnold, wrote appreciatively of the eternal message of the Bible and of the religious genius of ancient Israel. He believed that Israel taught the world the ultimate value of righteousness. That teaching, wrote Arnold, was essential to humanity for all time. In his book "Literature and Dogma" he asserted: "As long as the world lasts, all who want to make progress in righteousness will come to Israel for inspiration, as to the people who have had the sense for righteousness most glowing and strongest; and in hearing and reading the words Israel has uttered for us, carers for conduct will find a glow and force they could find nowhere else."

Arnold stressed the central role of righteousness in the teachings of the Bible. The Hebrew prophets left an impressive spiritual legacy, "and foresaw and foretold this inevitable triumph of righteousness."

The spirit of our Bible and biblical tradition is a source of eternal optimism for humanity. As bad as things sometimes seem, righteousness will ultimately prevail. Humanity will learn the virtue and happiness of living righteously, honestly, respectfully.

As the prophet Amos taught: "Behold the days are coming, declares the Lord God, that I will send a famine in the land, not a famine for bread nor a thirst for water—but for hearing the words of the Lord" (8:11).