

Parshat Eikev

The Dangers and Values of Being Stiff-Necked

Moshe Taragin

Recounting the sad episode of the egel disaster, Moshe reminds the Jews that they are a people of "keshei oref"- which literally translates as a stiff-necked people. This term, is employed four times in Ki Tisa, twice in Eikev, and numerous times throughout Tanach, generally referring to the character flaw of stubbornness or obstinacy. Though, typically, stubbornness is character defect, sometimes stubborn adherence to our convictions is crucial to a life of idealism.

Classically, a stiff neck describes someone unwilling to change or transform an aspect of their life or their behavior. Changing course in life demands 'turning our heads' to consider a new idea or a new approach. Inability to turn our heads or to change our opinions is symbolized by the image of a stiff neck. In fact, in Chapter 48, Yeshaya is so frustrated by indifference to his constant warnings to the Jews, that he actually laments their "necks of iron" which aren't just rigid but completely immovable. Stubbornness to personal change can stem from disproportionate self-confidence or from our comfort with the "familiar". The Rambam describes stubbornness and resistance to moral input as a "blocker" of potential teshuva. Healthy growth is almost impossible once we have stopped listening and stiffened our necks against change.

Beyond the stiffening of our necks against moral challenges, there is an additional connotation to the syndrome of 'keshei oref'. Sometimes we actively turn our heads "away" from important values or experiences—flashing the back of our necks as we abruptly turn aside. Instead of 'facing' an experience and assimilating its consequences, we turn our backs and necks upon the past. Presumably, this type of turning away typifies Jewish behavior during the egel and warrants their designation as stiff-necked. By worshipping an idol, the Jews didn't stiffen their necks against rebuke or moral correction. What angered God and frustrated Moshe was their sudden turning away from the glory at Sinai

six weeks earlier. How could they so easily disregard the "face-to-face" communication they enjoyed with God, and swerve away to idol-worship. Sadly, human nature is fickle and cognitive dissonance compartmentalizes our experiences and creates 'disconnect'. After moments of great inspiration, we foolishly and sometimes easily "turn our necks" elsewhere, turning our backs on the great moments and wandering. Sometimes we stiffen our necks while blocking out moral input but other times actively turn our heads away, ridiculously ignoring experiences which once captured our full attention.

However, despite the dangers of this trait, stubbornness can also be a positive quality. In his Sefer HaKuzari, Rebbe Yehuda Halevi asserts that God chose the Jews for two reasons. Firstly, we possess the unique ability to perceive prophecy and to respond to a supernatural and indiscernible world. Additionally, Jews were chosen because we are a people of uncanny resolve, not easily budged from mission or principles. Knowing that this historical calling would expose His proxies to hostility and even persecution, God selected a particularly stubborn and resilient people who would not buckle under the inevitable historical and religious pressure. Jews have outlasted anti-Semitism, in part, because we are stiff-necked. Our rabbis (Devarim Rabbah, Va'etchanan) attributed our long and storied tradition of martyrdom to our national obstinacy. Evidently, obstinate adherence to seminal ideas in the face of derision or disputation is a value.

It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between healthy intellectual obstinacy and unhealthy adherence to outdated ideas. Certainly, religious ideas are fundamentally immutable and should not be overhauled as new ideas are introduced into the human discourse. Religion is based upon "historical hierarchy"- ideas and laws established at earlier stages of history have authority over the ideas and behavior which emerge in successive generations. Those closer to the seminal moment of Sinai possess a clearer transmission and a more authoritative tradition. Ideas may be adjusted or refreshed but the core values remain unchanged. Obstinate preservation of religious truths is basic to our Masorah.

However, ideas and opinions which lie outside the direct arena of religion and halacha are meant to be fluid and adjustable. In this arena,

stubbornness to old, familiar ideas and the inability to pivot or adjust can cripple personal development. It is crucial to find people who can put our "heads on a swivel" – who can introduce fresh approaches as well as different perspectives upon old ideas to assure that our thoughts remain both emotionally deep and developmentally authentic, rather than rehearsed and formulaic. Too much inflexibility to outdated ideas hampers our developmental evolution.

Furthermore, though obstinacy to religious ideals is vital in preserving our foundational religious values, stubbornness is extremely harmful in personal relationships. Healthy relationships are based upon making difficult compromises and creating 'room' for the differing needs of another person. Obstinate people, less likely to compromise personal habits or needs are far more likely to struggle in relationship-building. Furthermore, every relationship includes feuds and disagreements and one of the secrets of a healthy relationship is the ability to apologize for even unintentional hurt. Stubborn people are often either too proud to apologize or oblivious to their role in the disagreement. Obstinacy and pride perpetuate disagreement rather than resolving them and enabling reconciliation.

Beyond unhealthy stubbornness and obstinacy, there is an additional connotation of being stiff-necked. Classic stubbornness is the inability to change our minds and the inability to turn our heads "completely around" to encounter a totally different idea. Changing our opinion would be equivalent to a 180-degree swivel- which sometimes reflects honest experience. Sometimes, however, life asks us to slightly rotate our necks to gain proportion and nuance even when retaining our previously held views. Too rigid a neck can impede these important "minor swivels" which typically lend subtlety and perspective to our opinions. Stiff-necked people remain very "frontal", highly opinionated and oftentimes simplistic. Life is complex and people are complex and rarely can black and white positions capture the diversity of the human condition. Even those who aren't stubborn, are often simplistic and non-nuanced in adopting views and opinions. Elastic necks are necessary to help us understand the validity of differing approaches to life. We inhabit a very polarized world and are becoming fanatical of black and white thought. The stiffer our necks, the more exclusive we believe our truths to be, and the less sensitive we are to the diversity of human

experience. Religious truths demand inflexible necks, but interpersonal relationships and the process of forming opinions are better served by "supple necks" which are capable of both minor swivels as well as fuller rotations.