

As the title of our parashah suggests, everything we do has consequences, whether or not we realize it. In this context, the word עֵקֶב (*eichev*) means in consequence of/because, but the root עקב builds words for heel, footprint, circumvent, follow closely, overreach, steep/difficult path, supplant and devious. What better word, then, for Moses to utter as he continues the narrative of his nearly four decade attempt to lead this fearful, unruly, often obliviously ungrateful multitude on its journey from the narrow bonds of slavery into the wide world of partnership in an eternal covenant with HaShem. The people he is addressing are their children and grandchildren, but since they have not had many good role models in their lives, it is essential that they truly understand their history so that they do not repeat it. It is noteworthy that when he retraces their steps and missteps, Moses speaks to them as though he were speaking to their elders, a device that helps them internalize his words – something we do when we recount the story of the Exodus during our Pesach seder as if it had happened to us personally. Intellectual insight is the first step, but it takes emotional insight to generate new habits, which only result from diligent, mindful practice. We all know how easy it is to become so overwhelmed that we lose heart and revert to those comfortable, destructive old habits. Moses, who has witnessed this all too often, finds a brilliant way to focus their attention. After briefly alluding to the egregious sin of the scouts, he reminds them of the golden calf debacle and of his pleading with HaShem after both of these incidents to give the people another chance instead of destroying them. Moses repeats the story of receiving the second set of tablets, and then drives the point home by recounting Aaron's death and the succession of the next generation with a pedagogically interesting discrepancy. "The children of Israel journeyed from the wells of B'nei Ya'akan to Mosarah; there Aaron died, and there he was buried; and Elazar his son served as kohen in his stead." (10:6) But just three weeks ago we read that they journeyed from Moserot (different spelling, but the same place) to B'nei Ya'akan, and from there via a few more stations to Mount Hor, where Aaron died. (Bamidbar 33:31-38) Citing the Jerusalem Talmud, Sotah 1:10, Rashi sees this as part of Moses' reproof: "If you calculate it, you will find eight stations from Moseroth to Mount Hor! ... When Aaron died on Mount Hor at the end of the 40 years and the clouds of Divine Glory departed, you were afraid of the impending war with the king of Arad. So you appointed a leader to return to Egypt, and went back eight stations until B'nei Ya'akan, and from there to Moserah. There the sons of Levi battled with you. They slew some of you, and you some of them, until they forced you to return by the way you had retreated." In other words, go back and do it again, but this time concentrate on your goal rather than on your fears. When we are first learning a new skill mistakes are inevitable, sometimes because we are not fully concentrating, but usually just because we are still developing proficiency. Anyone who has ever learned to ride a bicycle, play an instrument, or speak a new language can attest to the fact that it takes time and much mindful practice to reach fluency. I know this all too well as an opera singer. I have little to no recollection of roles I learned in a hurry and only performed a few times with eyes glued to the conductor, but the roles I prepared well and repeated multiple times are still deeply engrained. Establishing new behavioral patterns is no different, as anyone who has successfully overcome an addiction or changed their lifestyle understands. In order to form the behavioral patterns they need to flourish as a people, the Israelites must diligently practice observing the *mitzvot*. That is why we are instructed to incessantly repeat them to our children – not only with our mouths, but also through our actions, instilling a way of life in them that they will pass on to their own children. But this depends on another vital component: attitude. Our eternal covenant is not a document of entitlement, it is a reciprocal bond that obligates us to take HaShem's *mitzvot* seriously, to scrupulously heed the statutes, ordinances, and commandments that govern all aspects of personal and communal life. This begins with acknowledging HaShem's absolute uniqueness by replicating HaShem's transcendent love with our own love, a love that pervades our entire being and moves us to willingly serve HaShem by being the very best human beings we can be. Last week's parashah contained the first paragraph of our *shema Yisrael*, which defines our outward demonstration of love and loyalty and commands us to instill Torah in our children through continuous repetition. Now this is reiterated in the second paragraph, along with dire warnings against misusing the natural resources HaShem provides. For us, who live in peace and plenty, the "strange gods" we are urgently warned not to pursue are the manifestations of that old, pernicious complacency that causes us to forget where we came from and how we got there. We have so much, but we always seem to want more, heedless of the ultimate cost of our greed. Our children need this message now more than ever. We must continually repeat it in word and deed, in loving gratitude, so that they develop the same behavior and pass it on to their own children. That's why we're still here – because we have repeated these instructions *ledor vador*, from Moshe Rabbinu down to us.

Shabbat shalom!