

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Portion of Ekev

It's not easy being the new guy on the block. I had been in the army for almost two years but I had only just started active combat duty in Lebanon as a young second lieutenant, straight out of Officer's course, and while I may have outranked the guys in my platoon, I was also the one with the least amount of experience in the field.

Ten weeks of basic infantry training, three months of tank school and three months of tank-crew training in the field, followed by three months of tank commanders' course, a month of pre officer's infantry training and four and a half months of combat infantry officer's training followed by eight grueling months of Tank Officers training, and I was heavy on training but woefully short on field experience, and my men knew it.

One of the results of being in training so long was that I had gotten used to the army way of details: morning inspection, blankets folded just so, polished boots and the like. I wanted my men to pay attention to the details, having been trained to do just that. But months of duty in the field had worn down the men's resolve; why bother making your bed, if you were not even sure you'd make it through the day? Hard to tell a soldier to make sure his boots were polished, after an all-night ambush in the freezing cold, rain and mud of Lebanon.

The detail I most remember struggling with however, was regarding the way we carried our guns on patrol. We were meant to always have our gun-straps over our shoulders and across our chests, the theory being it was easier to grab and steal a gun off a soldier if it was just hanging on one shoulder. Additionally, as soon as we walked out the front gate of our mutzav (position or mini-base) standing orders were 'lock and load': we were in a hot zone and were meant to have a bullet in the chamber; the extra seconds it might take to flick the safety switch, and chamber a round could be the difference between life and death.

But that meant walking on patrol with eleven men in my command who all had a bullet in the chamber and often had the safety off as well, which was un-nerving to say the least, especially with most of them walking behind me. So, I was fanatical about making sure guys kept their trigger fingers off the trigger. It was an impossible expectation both because they knew I had just come out of so many courses and had far less field-experience as well as because there was no way to easily see a man's trigger finger, especially when you were always at the front of the column. Every time I saw someone with his finger on the trigger, I would have to order them all to watch it again, until it became a broken record player...

This all continued until I finally got a four-day pass to get out for Shabbat. When I got back to our base Sunday night, I was sent out on a night mission literally half an hour after getting back to base and immediately noticed all the men were somehow being much more careful with their trigger fingers. It transpired one of the men had accidentally fired off a shot (a 'plitat kadur') which narrowly missed

killing someone. He had tripped walking out of the base and fired off a shot that went through the thigh of the man in front of him narrowly missing his artery but sending him by emergency helicopter evacuation to Rambam hospital in Haifa.

The unfortunate soldier who had accidentally loosed off the shot was taken off active duty and given two weeks kitchen and guard duty along with menial base work. I later found out, the battalion commander decided an on-base punishment would be more effective as the rest of the men would constantly see him cleaning latrines and the like which would serve as a constant reminder: the details matter....

This week we read the portion of *Ekev*, which seems to continue discussing the big issues of Judaism. Last week (in the portion of *Devarim*) we recalled the mass revelation at Sinai and read the Ten Commandments along with the first portion of the Shema. This week we read the second portion of the Shema: all about the consequences of following or ignoring the path Hashem (G-d) has laid out for us.

Our portion this week begins with a curious turn of phrase:

*“Ve’haya **EKEV** tishme’un...”*

*“And it will come to pass **IF** you will listen to G-d’s word...”*

Rashi, commenting on this verse suggests (playing on the Hebrew word ‘*Ekev*’ used here to mean ‘as a result of ‘but which also means the heel of the foot) that this refers to the mitzvot (commandments) one often crushes with his heel. In other words, the issue introduced here is to be careful with the details we often find insignificant.

Imagine for a moment you are at a wedding, and the rabbi performing the ceremony shares a few words under the chuppah and exhorts the groom to make sure... never to take out the garbage? Why are the small details so important now?

A week after reviewing the Ten Commandments for the second generation of the Jewish people about to enter the land of Israel, Moshe is reminding them not to get so caught up in the big picture that they forget the details.

Most healthy people would never consider killing another human being or robbing a store: ‘thou shalt not murder’ and ‘thou shalt not steal’ are obviously beyond the pale. But the same people easily participate in character assassination at the Shabbat table or take their suit home from a hotel on one of the hotel’s hangers. Ethical balance, like leading a balanced life is not only about the big picture; it’s just as much about the small details.

Of course, this is easy to say but how do we make sure to live up to this?

The **Rambam** (Maimonides), in his *Hilchot Deot* (1:7) discusses how to make the character traits he espouses a part of life. Once a person understands the principle of finding the middle ground and achieving a healthy balance in his or her character, he or she must then act in this manner “**again and again ...until there is no longer any burden to the activity...**”

In other words, the Rambam is defining a habit: something becomes a habit when you have repeated it enough times so that it is no longer a burden. At that point, suggests the Rambam you no longer have to expend effort; you don't even have to think about it; you **own** it.

And that would seem to be the goal. To really own the things we learn and the behaviors we want to make a part of our lives. Whether it is the daily page of Talmud we study, or the decision to stand up for an elderly person on a bus, there is actually a metric; an exact point or number of times something is repeated at which point it becomes a habit which is easily done without thinking.

I recall once reading a book by Malcolm Gladwell who suggested, based on statistics that the average number of times it takes for the average person to turn the average activity into a habit, is sixty times. He suggests some activities are so easy for some people they can become a habit after twenty consecutive actions, and the most it will ever take a person to transform an action into a habit, is 120 times.

That means anything we do regularly for four months will become a habit. So, all we have to do is decide exactly what we would like to acquire as a habit.

Imagine if for ninety days we practiced one act of kindness in starting the day; like taking out the garbage, or letting another car enter the lane, and this became a habit; how much healthier would we be?

And imagine if for the same ninety days we practiced a moment of pure gratitude (said the *Modeh Ani* prayer?) immediately upon waking: how much healthier would we be psychologically?

As we enter the period leading up to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, choose an activity you want to make a habit!

The most powerful messages we share with ourselves and with those we love are the ones we repeat until we own them.

Something to think about, and something to practice....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman