

# ***Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality***

## **From Rav Binny Freedman**

### **Portion of Ekev (reprinted from 2005)**

*Theirs was a moment that captured the Nation. After over a year of speeches, talk shows, political debates, rallies, letters to politicians, bumper stickers and banners, it all came down to a small farming village a few Kilometers from the Gaza strip called Kfar Maimon.*

*On a hot summer's day, beneath the blistering desert sun, fifty thousand protesters, desperate to stop, or at least delay what they view as a national tragedy, the abandonment of twenty-one towns and villages along the sea in the Gaza strip, squared off against no less than twenty thousand Israeli soldiers and policemen.*

*The Israeli government had cast the die, and the stakes were enormous. They could not afford to let tens of thousands of protesters enter the towns and villages of Gush Katif en masse, and the protesters knew it.*

*Whether they were right or wrong we will never know, but the assumption was that if fifty thousand Jews could swamp the settlements of the Gaza strip, the government would never be able to expel all of them, and the disengagement plan would inevitably falter, and then grind to a halt.*

*This was the largest military operation since the Lebanon war, precisely because the stakes were so high. Democracy, rule of law, the right to a Jewish state, belief in a Jewish army, the sanctity of the land, non-violence; all these were the terms being thrown about out as tens of thousands of Jews in different uniforms and dress modes squared off to take a stand in the sand.*

*Recognizing that pushing through tens of thousands of soldiers, even un-armed, would not work, thousands of people struggled through the night to gain access to Gush Katif via the fields and sand dunes that abound in the area, and there began a game of cat and mouse, as Jews tried to stop Jews from entering the Gush to help Jews, in order to achieve peace or bring war for the Jews; it all would have made a great Woody Allen comedy, if it weren't so tragic.*

*And all of this pain was captured in the image of one woman, a mother pushing a stroller across a field, desperate to enter Gush Katif.*

*Up one furrow and down, then up the next and down, and then up then down, and again and again and again she struggled to maneuver her stroller over the furrows of dirt, gradually drawing closer to the ring of soldiers surrounding Kfar Maimon.*

*As she was the only person in the area, all eyes were trained on her as she came closer to the line of green blocking her way. The soldiers closed ranks, and you could almost feel the tension in the air: how do you stop a mother and baby who want to visit friends in a Jewish town? What do you say? What would she do?*

*The fear hidden in the back of everyone's minds these past weeks was whether a hundred thousand Jews could be removed, often forcefully, from their homes of generations, without bloodshed. And so this woman with a baby carriage was the unfolding of everyone's nightmare. And then there was the specter of massive disobedience on the part of the Israeli Army, and especially the officers: could they carry out*

*the orders to force Jews from their homes? Or would the Israeli Army wake up to a frightening new tomorrow? Here too, this was the essence of the tragedy of a Nation encapsulated in one lone woman with a baby.*

*The sight of hundreds of soldiers facing her did not slow her down; if anything, she seemed to walk faster, with more resolve, until finally, clearly exhausted, she stopped a short distance from them. Not knowing what to expect, the soldiers tensed, ordering her, even pleading with her, to turn around, but the woman stood her ground, refusing to turn back, clearly unsure of what to do, a lone woman with a baby, opposite a human wall of Israeli soldiers.*

*Suddenly a soldier broke from the ranks and strode towards her.*

*"Ima (Mother)!" he cried out, "What are you doing here with my baby brother?!"*

*and the two, mother and son, fell into each other's arms crying.*

*"I couldn't wait any longer", She said.*

So how do you pick up the pieces? How do hundreds of thousands of people, who believed in something so deeply, pick up the pieces on the morning after?

Forget for the moment, where all this is headed, and forget the political implications and impressions of where we are and how we got here, and whether this is indeed a morning after, or just a first scene, something political commentators will wrestle with around the world in the weeks and months ahead. How do we figure out, all of us, what to learn and where to go from here?

Perhaps this week's portion, *Ekev*, may provide us with some valuable food for thought on the topic.

The Jewish people are finally, after forty long years, making ready to enter the land of Israel. Most of the generation that left Egypt is gone, buried in unmarked graves in the desert, and their children, the second generation, born free in the desert, are preparing at last to cross the Jordan River and enter the land of Israel.

Moshe, their leader, will not accompany them as they begin the difficult task of carving a place for themselves amongst the community of Nations, and the portions we read in these weeks are essentially the farewell soliloquy of Moshe to a young generation about to cross the Jordan and enter the real world of nation-building.

There will be no more manna from heaven, nor heavenly clouds or pillars of fire to guard them on their journey; they will have to fight, and even die, for the right to call this small piece of land their home.

They will encounter seven pagan nations who are no strangers to pain and cruelty, and whose history and culture are full of wars and violence and even child-sacrifice as a part of their society.

So one would expect that Moshe would take this opportunity to share words of power and inspiration, designed to motivate this younger generation meet the tests that lie ahead. Which is what makes part of what we read this week so strange:

The ninth chapter of the Book of Devarim starts out well enough:

*“Shema Yisrael: atah over ha'yom et haYarden lavo lareshet Goyim gedolim va'atzumim mimekah'... ve'yada'ata' hayom ki' Hashem Elokecha' Hu' ha'over le'fanecha, esh ochlah'; Hu' yashmidem... ve'horashtem....”*

*“Hear O' Israel: you are crossing over the Jordan on this day to come and dispossess nations that are greater and mightier than you... know therefore on this day, that Hashem (G-d) your G-d, He will go before you with a consuming fire, and He will destroy them, and you shall inherit (this land)....”*  
(Devarim (Deuteronomy) 9:1-3)

Inspirational words, for an inspirational moment; but then, somehow Moshe seems to get all bent out of shape, as his speech takes an entirely different direction:

*“Al tomar bilevav'chah' ba'hadof Hashem Elokechah' otam milfanechah' leimor betzidkati he'viani Hashem lareshet et ha'aretz ha'zot... lo' betzidkatchah' u'beyosher levavchah' atah ba' lareshet et artzam, ki' berish'at ha'Goyim ha'eleh Hashem Elokecha morisham mi'panechah', le'ma'an hakim et ha'davar asher nishba' Hashem la'avotechah', le'Avraham, le'Yitzchak, u'le'Yaakov.”*

*“Do not say in your heart, when Hashem your G-d thrusts them (the Canaanites) out from before you, saying: 'in my righteousness G-d has brought me forth to inherit this land'... not in your righteousness nor for the straightness of your heart do you come to inherit their land, but (rather) for the wickedness of these nations does Hashem your G-d thrust them out from before you, in order to fulfill the word which He swore to your forefathers, to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov'(Devarim (Deuteronomy) 9:4-5)*

In other words, don't think you earned the right to enter the land, pay no attention to the fact that you faithfully followed your parents in the desert for forty years; you don't really deserve to enter the land of Israel at all! I am merely bringing you into the land, says G-d, to fulfill a promise I made to your forefathers! And, as if that isn't enough:

*“Veyada'ata' ki lo' be'tzidkatchah' Hashem Elokechah noten le'chah' et ha'aretz ha'tovah ha'zot le'rishtah', ki' am k'shei oref atah.”*

*“And you shall know that not in your righteousness does Hashem your G-d give you this good land to inherit, for you are a stiff-necked people.”* (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 9:6)

Not only don't you deserve this gift (of entering the land of Israel), continues Moshe, but you are a stubborn (stiff-necked) people! And this phrase, obviously a direct reference to the debacle of the Golden calf at Sinai, where G-d describes the Jewish people in the same manner, (Exodus (Shemot) 32:9) leads Moshe to admonish the people even more strongly:

*“Zachor, al tishkach, et asher hiktzaftah' et Hashem Elokechah' Bamidbar; le'min ha'yom asher yatzatah' me'eretz mitzraim ad boachem ad hamakom ha'zeh, mamrim hayitem im Hashem. U'be'Chorev hiktzaftem et Hashem va'yitanaf Hashem bachem le'hashmid etchem.”*

*“Remember, do not forget, that (when) you angered Hashem your G-d in the desert; from the very day you left Egypt until your coming until this place, you have been rebellious against G-d. And (even) at Sinai (Chorev) you angered G-d and G-d was wroth to destroy you.”* (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 9:7-8)

Apparently, on the eve of their triumphant return to the land of Israel after two hundred years of slavery, Moshe has no intention of allowing the Jewish people to enjoy the 'party', reminding them of just what a nasty bunch they have really been all along!

And, as if that isn't enough, over the course of the next twenty-one verses, Moshe proceeds to review in great detail the entire story of the sin of the Golden calf, and how the Jewish people caused Moshe to break the first tablets, and how Moshe had to pray for them, without which they would not have survived, as well as many of the other tragic rebellions and transgressions (9:22-24) of the Jews in the desert, including, of course, the tragic failure of the night the Spies returned, and the children of Israel missed the opportunity to enter the land nearly forty years earlier.

What is going on? If anything, one would have thought Moshe would seize the opportunity to excite the people about their imminent entry into the land of their dreams, as well as inspire them to take courage in what would surely prove to be the difficult days that lay ahead? And one might even have expected Moshe to compliment the people on their unswerving belief, despite wandering in the desert for forty long years, that one day Hashem would indeed bring them into the land of Israel.

Especially considering the fact that Moshe has already alluded to these mistakes and transgressions just a few chapters earlier (and according to tradition, historically a day earlier as part of the same speech; see our *Tastings of Torah: Devarim 02*), and given the fact that these transgressions were not even committed by this generation now preparing to enter the land, why does Moshe feel such a need to recall these terrible events? Why ruin the party?

In order to attempt an explanation of this somewhat surprising speech, it behooves us to take a closer look at what is really going on in this week's portion.

This week, along with everything else in the portion, we read one of the most well-known and oft-repeated chapters in the entire Torah: the second paragraph of the *Shema*, known as the chapter of "*Ve'haya'im shamoah*". (*Devarim* 11: 13-21). This is especially significant, given the fact that just last week, we read the first chapter of the *Shema*, the chapter of "*Ve'ahavtah*".

Obviously, if Jewish tradition chose to place these two chapters in two separate portions, read on two consecutive *Shabbatot*, there must be a connection between them, as well as two messages we are meant to absorb separately.

While an in-depth study of these two chapters is obviously far beyond the scope of this essay, a closer look does allow us to note an interesting parallel.

The first chapter, which always falls on *Shabbat Nachamu*, immediately after the fast of Tisha' B'Av, commemorating the destruction of both Temples, speaks of how we are meant to develop our relationship with G-d, and achieve our purpose in this world.

It is all about what we have to give, and how we have to give it; to love G-d with all our hearts and souls, and to keep this recipe for an ethical world we call the Torah close to our hearts, and in the hearts of our children, as well as written on our doorposts, and even bound on our arms.

The second chapter, while repeating much of what is shared in the first, adds the critical dimension of what has come to be known as "*sechar va'onesh*" or 'reward and consequence'.

The Torah this week tells us what the result of following the Torah and keeping G-d and our purpose in this world close to our hearts will be, as well as the implications of what will transpire when we forget who we really are.

Curiously, again, the Torah tells us that if and when we forget why we were given this land, we will lose it, clear and simple.

In other words, just as they are about to enter the land, the Jewish people are actually told that if they (we) do not live up to the privilege and the mission it represents, they (we) will lose it; it is not ours to keep; it is ours to earn.

Many of the commentaries suggest that where the first paragraph, speaking as it does in the singular, refers to our relationship with G-d as individuals, the second paragraph refers to our relationship to G-d as a community.

Hence in the first paragraph we are exhorted to love G-d, “*Ve’ahavta*” “*And you (singular) shall love Hashem your G-d...*” and in the second paragraph we are told what will occur “*...im ... tishme’u*” “*...if you (plural) will listen...*” to the mitzvot we are given.” And even when the singular form is used in the second paragraph it refers to the fact that we need to be together, as one....

But there is more. It is interesting to note that in both chapters we find the same two mitzvot placed side by side: the mitzvah of teaching our children, and the mitzvah of tefillin, with one notable difference: the order is reversed. In the first chapter of the Shema, we find:

*“Ve’shinantem le’vanechah’ ve’dibarta’ bam, be’shivte’chah be’veitecha, u’velechtechah’ ba’derech, u’veshachbechah’ u’vekumechah’. U’keshartem le’ot al ya’dechah’, ve’hayu le’totafot bein einechah’.”*

*“And you (singular) shall teach them (these words) diligently (constantly) to your children and speak of them, when you sit in your home, and when you walk on the road, and when you lie down and when you arise. And you shall tie them (these words) as a sign on your hands, and they shall be an adornment between your eyes.”* (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 6:7-8)

And in the second chapter we are told:

*“U’keshartem otam le’ot al yedchem ve’hayu’ le’totafot bein eineichem. Ve’limadetem otam et be’neichem, le’daber bam, be’shivtechah’ be’veitechah’, u’velechtechah’ ba’derech. u’veshachbechah’, u’vekumechah’.”*

*“And you (plural) shall tie them for a sign upon your hands and they shall be an adornment between your eyes. And you shall teach them to your children, to speak of them, when you sit in your home, and when you walk on the road, and when you lie down and when you arise.”* (Devarim (Deuteronomy) 11:18-19)

**Rav Menachem Mendel Schneerson**, in his *Likkutei Sichot*, points out that the first chapter of the Shema, and indeed the entire portion of *Va’Etchanan*, in which it appears, represents revelation from above; it is all about what Hashem gives us. Hence the portion begins with Moshe’s entreaty to G-d to allow him to enter the land, as well as containing the Ten Commandments, the example par excellence of the idea that what we have really comes from G-d. The second chapter of the Shema is more about what we do with what Hashem has given us in this world; it is all about man’s situation in this world,

and the harsh realities of how difficult it can often be to live up to that mission and that gift, and indeed, this is the theme of the entire portion of *Ekev*. Indeed, the very name *Ekev* also means the heel, the lowliest and least sensitive part of our body, alluding to our lowly station on this earth.

And this is why the order of these two ideas is reversed in these two chapters of the Shema: the mitzvah of keeping the Torah in our hearts and in the hearts of our children wherever we are, is all about recognizing that everything, and everywhere we are, all stems from G-d. That even when ‘we lie down’, no matter how difficult life can be, it all comes from G-d, and this mitzvah refers to the opportunity, even the decision to keep G-d in our lives and make Him a part of everywhere we are, and all that we do. The focus is clearly on Hashem.

The mitzvah of tefillin, however, of actually taking a physical object from something so base as the hide of an animal, and tying it to our hands, refers to the actual mitzvah, and our ability to transform this world into something holy. The focus is clearly on us, and a close look at the portion of *Ekev* clearly resonates with this theme. Hence the reference to our greatest transgressions as a people: G-d gave us the Torah, but, in the harsh light of reality, we were not yet up to the task.

And maybe, hidden in this idea is a critical concept that can make all the difference in our lives. It is very easy, both when confronted with life’s difficulties, and especially when achieving our greatest successes, to become so immersed in our own accomplishments that we forget what a gift it all really is. And when we start to think, even to a small degree, that our successes are our own, the road to forgetting what it is really all about and where it really comes from, becomes all too easy.

Three thousand years ago, a people, which had just witnessed some of the greatest miracles in history, took some pride in their own accomplishments, and reveled in their success leaving Egypt and achieving the spiritual level necessary to receive the Torah at Sinai. And when they (we) let G-d’s role take even the smallest step aside, it is a very short road to forgetting just how much it is all G-d in the first place. Hence Moshe describes how the people:

*“Saru maher min ha’derech asher tzivitim, asu’ la’hem masechah.”*  
*“They have turned away from the path I have commanded them, and made for themselves a mask.”*  
(9:12)

Indeed, when we begin to assume it is about us, then G-d becomes distant, and His place in our lives becomes masked. (Note the word calf is not used in this instance, but rather the ‘mask’.)

On the one hand, Judaism does not want us to wait in our prayer pews for G-d’s deliverance; we are meant to be partners with G-d in making this world a better place. But precisely at those junctures when we become so immersed in our role in this world, we always need to remember that in the end it all comes from and leads to a higher purpose. It is so critical to remember we are not the goal, we are the vehicle.

And so, precisely now, as the Jews are about to leave the spiritual greenhouse of the desert where Manna falls from heaven and clouds of glory abound, and enter the land where they will have to fight and work to build this world, Moshe reminds them not to repeat the mistakes of the past, and to remember who is really leading the way.

Forty-five years after the Six Day War, it is a very tempting thing to become proud, and maybe even arrogant about the accomplishments of the Jewish people in their land.

Less than twenty years after fighting a war for our very existence as a Jewish State, and still in the process of completing the absorption of over eight hundred thousand mostly poverty-stricken immigrants from the Arab countries of the Middle East and North Africa (which more than *doubled* the Jewish population of the State of Israel at the time), the Israeli Army, in six days, swept through the vastly superior numbers of the Arab Armies and won a decisive victory in what became known as the Six Day War.

So maybe we earned the right to be proud of our accomplishments? And maybe we were finally almost there; just around the corner from the third commonwealth, a rebuilt third Temple, peace....

After two thousand years of dreaming, we, as a generation were given the privilege of being able to walk the alleys of ancient Jerusalem, pray at the *Kotel*, the Western Wall, and wander the hills where David and Abraham once walked. Jews can don the uniforms of a Jewish army, and defend a Jewish homeland for the Jewish people, and any Jew, anywhere in the world, just a few decades after the Holocaust, can board a Jewish airline emblazoned with the Jewish star, and come home, whenever he or she wants.

Is there enough one generation can have done in this world, to merit that kind of privilege? Or are we riding on the backs of the generations of Jews, who over two thousand years never gave up believing that we would come home one day?

Perhaps being made to recall, especially on the verge of what might seem our greatest achievements, all of our greatest mistakes, is actually a very healthy way to begin the sobering task of such a holy mission as entering the land of Israel. And maybe this was at the heart of Moshe's words to the Jewish people so long ago.

On a personal note, twelve years ago this week, on the twentieth of Av, Hashem saw fit to allow me to walk out of the S'barro's pizzeria unharmed, when a suicide bomber blew himself up killing seventeen people and wounding over sixty. Twelve years ago, I watched Lily Shamilashvili die in front of me, and years later the families of Malki Roth and the Schijveschuurder family hold their memorial services at the Har Ha'menuhot cemetery where they are buried. We have been given this incredible land, but we have a lot of work to do yet, to make it the place it is meant to be.

Take a moment this Shabbat, to remember all those who have been torn from life so brutally over these last years, and their families for whom the pain is always there, even growing as more and more people tend to move on....

May Hashem bless us all to live up to all that we can be, and may we continue, with all the challenges, to remember what a privilege it is that we live in such special times where we are given so many gifts and opportunities to make this world the place we all dream it can become.

Shabbat Shalom from Efrat and Yerushalayim,

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