

TORAH JOURNEYS

THE INNER PATH TO THE PROMISED LAND



RABBI SHEFA GOLD

Ekev
(Because)

DEUTERONOMY 7:12 - 11:25

Moses warns the people about the spiritual dangers that will face them when they enter the Land and cautions them to remember God who is the source of all blessing.

THE BLESSING

EKEV MEANS “because.” Our covenantal obligation binds us to pay careful attention to the details of service to Life and Love. It is BECAUSE of that attention that we become present and receptive to the Great Flow of blessing. It is BECAUSE of our remembrance of God-Shining-Out-From-the-Center-of-All-Things, that we can truly experience this blessing. As we receive the blessing of *Ekev*, the blessing is expanded to include an understanding of just how and why this blessing comes to us.

Blessing is such a subjective thing. I once suffered a bad case of food poisoning. Even after recovering from the worst of it, I didn't have an appetite for a week. When my hunger and ability to enjoy food finally returned, it felt like such a miracle. I have not taken the blessing of my appetite for granted since. Without the affliction of food poisoning, would I have ever understood the blessing of appetite?

The Torah portion *Ekev* gives meaning to the difficulties of our journey. We are afflicted and tested so that God will know what is in our heart, which means that we will come to know the depths of our own hearts and there find the gift of being human. Our hearts hold the key to making all of our life into a blessing. The Blessing of *Ekev* can be found in its words that say “You shall eat and you shall bless, and you shall be satisfied.”¹ From this text we derive the *mitzvah* of *Birkat Hamazon*, the blessing after the Meal.

YOU SHALL EAT: Open yourself wide to receive all the goodness and beauty of the world. Take in with pleasure the fullness of its nourishment.

YOU SHALL BLESS: When you eat, remember the Source of all Goodness. Taste God in every bite and acknowledge the gift you are receiving.

¹ Deuteronomy 8:10

AND YOU SHALL BE SATISFIED: Instead of immediately reaching out for more or for what's next, rest consciously in the fullness of this moment, this bite, this morsel of life.

THE ADDICTIONS AND HABITS that keep us unsatisfied also prevent us from the passionate fulfillment of our relationship to God. The prophet Jeremiah quotes the Divine Lover's lament, "They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water."² (God brought us out of slavery to be in loving relationship with the Divine spark in all things. That relationship is fulfilled through the blessing of satisfaction.)

True satisfaction grows into gratefulness and thus makes our eating holy. When we experience true satisfaction, we are filled with energy rather than complacency. True satisfaction prevents over-consumption, because it slows down the process and lets us savor each bite. Experiencing satisfaction, we are cured of addiction, and the chain of habit is broken.

THE SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE

IT IS POSSIBLE to eat everything in sight and to say 100 blessings a day in perfect Hebrew, and yet remain unsatisfied. The spiritual challenge of *Ekev* is to break the spell of consumerism whose power rests in our continual dissatisfaction.

As you enter the Land of your life: a land of fountains and depths, valleys and hills, shopping malls and glossy catalogues, a land of wheat and barley, television commercials and billboards and vines and fig-trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey, a place of comforts and the illusion of security... you are in mortal danger of forgetting where all of these gifts come from. It will seem that you made this life for yourself, that *you* are the Creator.

As I go in to conquer the land and make a life for myself, the force of my ambition begins to rise. Each success feeds that ambition; each failure pushes me into exerting more force. Here is the spiritual challenge of *Ekev*. How do I protect myself from the corrupting power of my own ambition? How do I discern between self-destructive greed and a true, healthy appetite for pleasure that allows the blessing of satisfaction to manifest?

² Jeremiah 2:13

Ekev teaches us that as you enter the Land of your life, you need not be afraid of anyone, for the great and awesome force of divinity resides within you. That is the key. I must recognize the force of my ambition to be, in reality, the God-force that moves through me. The moment I mistake that power as my own, I am in danger of corruption. If my attention leaps to the next possibility for satisfaction without resting in this present moment and savoring its richness, it is a sign that I have succumbed to the momentum of my own greed.

WHEN WE CROSS from the place of our spiritual practice into the Land of our everyday lives, *Ekev* tells us that we must circumcise the foreskin of our hearts, and be no more stiff-necked.

The layers of defense built up around my heart will actually prevent me from tasting and receiving the subtleties and richness of this world. With my senses I receive the color and fragrance, taste and texture of Creation. But then the foreskin of the uncircumcised heart will prevent me from benefiting from those riches. It will deflect the fullness of pleasure, beauty, and nourishment that my soul requires. Feeling deprived, I will always want MORE. The uncircumcised heart keeps me forever hungry, forever unsatisfied.

So what is the foreskin of my heart?
And how does this circumcision happen?

TONIGHT I WATCH as moonlight dances on the water. I stop my worrying, let go of my plans, and surrender to the simplicity of light and water and a cool breeze against my face. I look up at the stars and feel my place among them as all the petty dramas of the day dissolve in this vast expanse. My body opens to the pleasure of just being. My spine lengthens, shoulders drop, belly softens, and breath deepens. The whole world seems to breathe with me.

And what does it mean to be stiff-necked?
How do I recover my full range of motion?

I HAVE BEEN rushing around all day, trying to get things done. I have been focused on my "To Do" list, trying to do as much as possible, trying to accumulate power and knowledge. I lift my head from the list, from my accomplishments and I notice the world. Suddenly the world lifts me up above the smallness of my life. The panorama of Creation spreads out

before me. In a flash I am the primordial human seeing from one end of the world to the other. I see everything. And I know absolutely nothing.

GUIDANCE FOR PRACTICE

LIFTING UP THE HOLY SPARKS IN OUR FOOD

“You shall eat and you shall bless and you shall be satisfied.” Our practice for this week of Ekev is to fulfill this commandment in the dangerous land of our everyday lives. So many Jewish spiritual practices are about eating, because it’s a fragile time for consciousness. There is a tendency to lose awareness, go on automatic. When our level of awareness drops, we don’t notice the subtleties of satisfaction. We may eat to try to fill some other unacknowledged hunger that has nothing to do with food.

Spiritual practices that surround eating are designed to open our eyes to the miracle of appetite, taste, nourishment, and satisfaction. When we eat, we are transforming matter into energy. In Hasidic language, we are “lifting up the holy sparks” that are in the food.

THE BA’AL SHEM TOV TEACHES,³ “When you are eating or drinking something, have it in your mind that the taste you feel in your mouth when you are chewing or swallowing is the innermost holiness of the food, the holy spark that is in the food or drink.”

AS WE LIFT THE HOLY SPARKS UP TO THEIR SOURCE, so may we be lifted through our enjoyment of them.

PREPARE A SACRED MEAL and set the table beautifully with candles, flowers and your best dishes. When you sit down to eat, imagine that your table is the holy altar in the Temple. Say a blessing. Savor the fragrance of the food. (No TV or reading during this meal.) Eat slowly, enjoying each bite, knowing that the taste of the food holds its innermost holiness. After your meal, take a few minutes to experience satisfaction.

THE TRADITIONAL *BIRKAT HAMAZON* (GRACE AFTER MEALS) is composed of four main blessings. Create your own blessing in four parts by meditating on each of these four themes. Take a few moments to commit your new blessing to paper.

³ *Derech ha-Tovah v'ha-Yeshara, Seudah*, p.27b. Quoted in Buxbaum, Yitzchak, *Jewish Spiritual Practices* (Jason Aronson, 1999)

THE FOOD – Gratefulness and wonder at its taste and texture and fragrance and nourishment.

THE LAND FROM WHICH THE FOOD GREW – Gratefulness and wonder at the process of growth (from sun and seed and water) through harvest.

JERUSALEM – Find the center of holiness within yourself. Bless the place within that allows you to experience the miracle of this meal.

GOODNESS ITSELF – Through the pleasure and energy of this food we are reminded of the essential Goodness of life.

PLACE THE BLESSING YOU HAVE WRITTEN ON YOUR TABLE to keep it handy during this week of *Ekev*.

RECITE YOUR PRAYER AT LEAST ONCE EACH DAY after you have eaten.