

D'var Torah
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Parshah Ekev

Deuteronomy 7:12 – 11:25

1st Year of the Triennial Cycle • Deut. 7:12 – 9:3

18 Av 5780 · August 8, 2020

Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Shalom Aleichem. Gut Shabbos.

I want to start, as I always do, by thanking Rabbi Weinblatt for giving me the honor of delivering a d'var Torah. I want to thank my teachers, Cantor Kapell and Rabbi Tow. It is an honor to *daven* with you this morning; thank you for your spirit and thank you for your presence.

Today, In my discussion of Parshah Ekev, I will answer the age-old question why is this parshah like my mother's living room. It will take a bit to get to that point, perhaps in the second 30 minutes of this d'var Torah. Hang on.

The Torah belongs to us, we are told. The Torah is book of all books for the people of the book. If that is so, why does Moshe have to climb a mountain for the Torah? Not only did Moses have to schlepp up the mountain to get the Torah, but according to Rabbi Joshua ben Levi, a third century scholar, Moses had to take, not receive the Torah. Moses put in a lot of work in to getting something that is supposed to be for us anyway.

According to ben Levi, When Moses arrived at the top of Sinai, the angels protested to God. We have had the Torah up here, in heaven, for 974 generations. Why now, all of a sudden, are we to give Torah to a mere mortal, they said. Why are we giving the Torah to a person "born of woman," they said. What happens in Shamayim stays in Shamayim, they said.

Moses responded to the angels. Who are you to say the Torah stays in heaven? Were you slaves in Egypt? Did you see our babies slaughtered by the Egyptians? Did you wander for 40 years in the desert? Do you labor so hard during the week that you need Shabbos? We worked for this Torah. We died for this Torah. This is our Torah.

Ultimately, the heavens acquiesced, and Torah was given to Moses. In the end, it seemed, that in order for the Torah to grow and flourish, and by extension, the Jewish people, Torah could not be kept locked up in heaven. Torah, even if it may not be followed all ways by all people, it must come down from the mountain and live with the people. This is why Torah is like my mother's living room.

When I was younger and living in my parents' home in New Rochelle, New York, we had a living room and that room could only be entered on special occasions. Hundreds of square feet of prime real estate and it was only allowed to be used ten days a year. What a waste. My mother's mother, Sadie Rosenberg, Aleha Ha'Shalom, went further by covering her furniture in plastic. Nu, if we have a room in the house, we should use it. If we have Torah in the world, we should use it. We do not use Torah only on Shabbos and chagim, we use it every day, all year. Back in New Rochelle, I would defy my mother and use this room from time to time, I would not wait for a special occasion to use it, I would go and take it.

Moses did not say in Ekev that he had to fight for the Torah, but it does say he took the Torah. Often translated as received, the verb, l'kakh, (לָקַח), means to take or to seize, rather than l'kabel (לְקַבֵּל), to receive. This interpretation was new for me, and something I picked up from reading Dana Weiss, the Rosh Beit Midrash at Hadar. As Weiss noted, this was more than just a passive receipt of Torah, but something Moses had to work for.

The lesson here is that when something is so important, so existential, it's worth arguing over and fighting for. As Wendy and I have often said in our kids' arguing, "is this a big thing, or a little thing?" Torah, is a gantsech gedilleh, a big deal. Torah is what has kept us alive and sustained us all these years.

Torah, it seems again from midrash, sustained Moses while he spent 40 days on the mountain. We are told that while he was on Sinai, he did not eat or drink. The mentioning of Moses' fast in Ekev clearly is important. Midrash (Shmot Rabbah) says that Moses ate Torah for sustenance and that it was as sweet as honey. Torah commentary goes on to say that when you go to another city, you should observe the customs of that city. When in Shamayim do as the Shamayimim do. Angels do not eat or drink, but they feasted on Torah. So did Moses. Just like the custom in my parent's house was that you should not sit in the living room except on special occasions. Nu? Maybe my mother is an angel. By the way, the angels returned the custom when they sat in Abraham and Sarah's tent.

When I speak of Torah here, I mean it in the broad sense of the way of the word, the derech eretz. If the Torah is only brought out on special occasions, it will die. The Torah needs the Jews just as much as the Jews need Torah. Yes, honoring derech eretz can be messy and uncomfortable, but we must use it to survive.

עֵץ חַיִּים הִיא לַמַּחֲזִיקִים בָּהּ, וְתִמְכֶּיהָ מְאֻשָּׁר. Etz chayim hi lamachazikim ba, V'etomecheha me'ushar. She is a tree of life to those who grasp her, And whoever holds on to her is happy.

There is another midrash, by the way, that says that Moses came down with 15 commandments. You can find this midrash from the Brooksaker Rabbi. Reb Brooks is a thousand year old sage living in Ayir Ha'Mahlakhem (עִיר מְלָאָכִים), the City of Angels.

Now, let me take you forward in time from Sinai, passed my childhood in New York, to today. These are strange and troubled times and there are plenty of days where I oscillate from frustration, to anger, to sadness, to dejection. I sometimes feel like Abraham in Haran, Sarah in Canaan, Hannah in Shilo, and Job in Uz. What has helped me in this time of pandemic and a new period of renewed social injustice – what has sustained me – are you, my friends, my fellow congregants, and my shul. We are distant, but we are together. Nachamu, nachamu, ami; comfort, comfort my people.

Moses said in Ekev that during fearful times, we follow that derech eretz. Moses said “And now, O Israel, what does Adonai your God ask of you? Only this: to fear Adonai your God, to walk only in God’s paths, to love God, and to serve Adonai your God with all your heart and soul.” The message of humility was stressed by Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berdichev in *Sefer Kedushat Levi*.

I am not very familiar with Rabbi Amy Eilberg, but I came across something she wrote on Evev. Eilberg’s bio says that she “serves a spiritual director, kindness coach and peace and justice educator.” The world could use a little more of that, it seems, so I read on. Eilberg wrote about Ekev: “To act in the world, to practice love when we may be mocked for doing so, we must believe that living in this way will make a difference. To engage in deeds of service, we must believe in our own power and efficacy, stepping up to right wrongs, working for change, striving to correct that which is broken in our world.” This is a core message of the Torah that Moshe had to wrestle with to take down from Sinai. In a time of dislocation, be a connection.

During this time, I have taken to studying and praying harder and more frequently. If the derech erez changes only me, it will be worth it, but we are so much stronger together. Join me on this path, as I join with you. If we can walk together along the derech erez, even just a little bit, maybe we can be angels here on earth.

Gut Shabbos. Aleichem Shalom.