

Parashat Ekev: Wake Up! Wake up!

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Dear Friends,

Parashat Ekev is the third parasha in the book of D'varim. It is difficult and brilliant, disturbing and wonderful, just like the entire Torah is. Just as life is.

If I were consulted, I would have suggested putting the following quote in Israel's Declaration of Independence (thank God it wasn't though, as most people wouldn't be able to understand the depth of it and would get stuck in the harsh, overly zealous and certainly politically-incorrect surface).

"Hear, O Israel: you are to pass over the Jordan this day, to go in to dispossess nations greater and mightier than yourself, cities great and fortified up to heaven, a people great and tall, the sons of the Anakim, whom you know, and of whom you have heard say: 'Who can stand before the sons of Anak?' Know therefore this day, that the LORD your God is He who goes over before you as a devouring fire; He will destroy them, and He will bring them down before you; so shall you drive them out, and make them to perish quickly, as the LORD has spoken unto you. Speak not you in your heart, after that the LORD your God has thrust them out from before you, saying: 'For my own righteousness the LORD has brought me in to possess this land'; rather, for the wickedness of these nations the LORD does drive them out from before you. Not for your righteousness, or for the uprightness of your heart... Know therefore that it is not for your righteousness that the LORD your God gives you this good land to possess it; for you are a stiff-necked people... From the day that you did go forth out of the land of Egypt, until you came to this place, you have been rebellious against the LORD." (Deuteronomy 9: 1-7)

When I look at the world around us – the Middle East and beyond – I am convinced that we are - in spite of all those who were led to believe the opposite - a highly ethical nation, in which most people seek justice and peace. But these verses are saying something else, much more important, and I think there are two parallel but very different conversations taking place here.

One very important conversation is about justice. The nations who were here lost the land because of their wickedness. The Torah even states clearly in God's promise to Abraham some four hundred years earlier, that the Israelites will sojourn in Egypt as a waiting period during which the Canaanite wickedness will become so severe as to warrant exile. The lesson is simple and clear: wickedness, or the lack of justice, bring destruction. Though we are very familiar with this notion, its message remains important and needs to be heard, over and over again.

The second conversation has nothing to do with justice at all, and it is much less familiar. Therefore, I will focus on it this year, though the path to my conclusion may seem circuitous. But bear with me! All will be well in the end.

Way back at the dawn of history, a terrible - and at the same time a wonderful - glitch occurred: Humans began thinking for themselves... thinking OF themselves... thinking that they themselves were the be all and end all of Creation. In the last several hundred years, we fired God all together, and declared ourselves His enlightened heirs. Oh, and also that there is no other God but us.

This glitch began as a bug in the system. To this day we don't know whether it was an intentional bug, meaning that it was part of a greater evolutionary plan, or whether something went wrong (there is proof in the Torah for both possibilities). For the purposes of this discussion, I will assume that the glitch was an unintended bug.

What does this bug do? Placing ourselves at the center of creation opens a window of virtual opportunities! Humans have indeed become great - we are able to do, create, envision, like no other species on this planet.

The only problem is that anyone looking through this virtual window is convinced that what they see is real! If it wasn't so tragic, it might even be cute, or funny.

If this bug was unintentional - "just" a Divine mistake - then we must find a way of closing this virtual window and returning to reality as soon as possible, albeit, without losing human greatness. If, on the other hand, the bug is part of the Divine plan, then - oy vey - that would be extremely irritating! Because it would mean that we are participating in a horrible and illusive game. Not a fun bug at all. While some of the things we can see through the virtual window of our might are pleasant and even nice, certainly flattering, all in all, life seen through it is an ongoing nightmare of violence, hunger, war, disease, and death. We have come to believe that we are all mighty, but we don't really know how to be The Almighty.

No wonder stress has been declared the #1 cause of death in modern times.

This bug works very much like a nightmare - it seems extremely believable while we are dreaming it. However, from nightmares we eventually wake up, but the bug under discussion does not (yet) have a remedy. Almost no one has managed to awaken from it. We are stuck in this virtual window, unable to turn our gaze. Instead of realizing that it is only a virtual, unreal window and snapping out of the trance, we spend a lot of energy trying to find ways of easing our experience. We have developed painkillers, and pills against anxiety; we have learned to think positively; some of us have even stopped reading the newspapers; we practice yoga, we meditate, breath, and convince ourselves that we are fine; that we are right, ethical, and wonderful.

Parashat Ekev tries to fix the bug, to awaken us from this nightmare:

"Beware lest you forget the LORD your God... lest when you have eaten and are satisfied, and have built goodly houses, and dwelt therein; and when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied; then your heart be lifted up, and you forget the LORD your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage; who led you through the great and dreadful wilderness, wherein were serpents, fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where there was no water; who brought you forth water out of the rock of flint; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers knew not... **and you will then say in your heart: 'My OWN power and the might of my OWN hand has gotten me this wealth.'**.. I forewarn you this day that you shall surely perish. As the nations that the LORD makes to perish before you, so shall you perish..."(8: 11-20)

Most of this parasha deals in one way or another with the revolutionary idea that calls us to stop considering our little selves the center, because we aren't, and neither is our wisdom, our righteousness, our morality, our military might, our physical, or even our spiritual strength.

Isn't it time to admit this great truth?

Are we ready to accept that we are not the center of the universe?

In fact, is it alright to say that this story is not about us at all?

That we are just actors in "Someone" else's play?

Can you imagine the freedom we would know if we let go and let God

If the answer to these questions is "yes", then perhaps we are beginning to wake up.

If the answer is "no", then we'll try again next year.

But before we press the "no" button, one last question: what would our world look like - and our own personal lives look like - if humility became our core value?

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha