

Parashat Ekev: Tough Demands!

Rabbi Elisha Wolfin

Dear Friends,

Ekev means "if... then...": "**IF you obey these rules and observe them carefully, THEN the LORD your God will maintain faithfully the covenant...**" (D'varim 7: 12).

"If... then..." is called determinism. Determinism states that every event has a cause, and that cause, in turn, also has a cause that **necessarily** caused it.

There is a dispute among Greek philosophers if this chain of cause-and-effect goes on ad infinitum, or if there is a first original cause, which they call "the first mover". In Judaism there obviously is, and it is called... "God". "God" created/caused everything into being, but "God" Himself, being the first cause, was not caused/created.

But then comes a hitch:

"Take care lest you forget the LORD your God ... When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware, lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the LORD your God... for you will say to yourselves, "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." (8: 11-17)

In other words, don't take credit for your achievements!

This is tough! It goes against our Western grain, against the values of modernity and our entire education system. We teach our children that only she who works hard will succeed; that he who eats well and exercises will be healthier; that they who toil before Shabbat get to eat delicious food on Shabbat, etc.

I would like to suggest that the problem lies not in taking credit. It lies, rather, in Greek philosophy of Determinism. The chain of cause and effect is binding and allows no room for freedom. Everything is subjugated to cause and effect - even God!

Gevalt!!!

The God of Israel IS the essence of freedom. God declares so in the first of the Ten Commandments: **I the LORD am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage** (Exodus 20, 2). The God of Israel cannot possibly be bound by the laws of Determinism.

Taking credit (i.e., "**my own power and the might of my own hand**") is a Greek notion, for it affirms cause and effect - if you do X, you will get Y. It omits infinite

other possibilities, such as talent, sheer luck, help from outside sources (known and unknown), a grand plan of some kind, etc. The modern ear hates these other possibilities, and certainly dislikes anything to do with the involvement of a “mysterious hand”, a “higher power”, or God.

But this is only because many hold on to a very superficial understanding of God. A much (much!) deeper and sophisticated understanding will allow for a depth of freedom unlike any other!

The essence of the "covenant that He made with your fathers... (for which) you shall be blessed above all other peoples" (7: 12-14) is the letting go of our belief in cause and effect (and leave it for the ancient Greeks). *Remember: cause and effect are just another belief system. Even if we know that X always follows Y, we can never truly know what caused X. All we have is theories.*

That's a challenging covenant. Sticking to Greek philosophy is much more appealing. Cause and effect give us a (false) sense of control and meaning. “If... then...” provides the illusion that there is a rhyme or reason for everything. Job, in his terrible suffering, demanded an explanation from God for the cause of his suffering. God, of course, refused to provide one! Friedrich Nietzsche was famous for saying: if there is a good and satisfying “why”, everything becomes bearable.

Greek culture still reigns today. Western culture is simply a variation of it. But Parashat Ekev demands that we give up that anchor - give up that proven explanation that Job demands, and Nietzsche's “why”.

What are we left with without this anchor? What is there to hold on to?

Faith. Faith in a Creative Force - which the Torah calls God - that creates everything out of Its own radical free will, every single moment anew.

I know it is difficult, but Parashat Ekev is inviting you to know the most incredible blessings bestowed on humans.

Isn't it worth it?

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha