



Parashat Ekev: Infinite Intelligence

Dear Friends,

My drashot are directed at those who dislike categories such as “religious” and “secular.” I rarely write about Halacha, in the narrow sense that this word is used, but I do delve into issues of faith, which is our topic today too.

I have total faith in the wondrous intelligence that permeates all creation. This intelligence has infinite names. I call it “God”, “the Creator”, “the Holy One”, or simply “Hashem.” Someone else may call that same intelligence “nature.” The name is not important. What is important is that when explored deeply, this intelligence is far greater than our own human intelligence. Human beings, who pride themselves on being the “pinnacle of creation” may perhaps be so, yet we are infinitely less intelligent than that which upholds the universe in and around us.

Albert Einstein - in an answer to a question by a very concerned chief rabbi of New York in the late 1920s (“do you believe in God”?) - answered that he believes in the God of Spinoza. I have written quite a bit about the God of Spinoza here, even quite recently. Spinoza had a very deep belief in God, and I think that the rabbis who excommunicated him and still do, simply did not, and do not understand him or the depth of his thought.

From the dawn of history - wrote Einstein in an article in the New York Times in 1930, inspired by that same conversation he had with New York’s chief rabbi - humans have tried to understand that wondrous and infinite intelligence, and we will never entirely comprehend it, because it is... infinite.

Anyone who does not accept the God of Einstein and Spinoza, regarding the wondrous intelligence that exists and upholds everything has never gazed for very long at a Eucalyptus tree, or saw an injury healing; neither did they study human anatomy or watch someone breathing in their sleep; they were not amazed by a plane taking off, and never saw a cardiologist successfully implanting a new heart!

And yet, an abyss yawns widely between the God of Einstein and Spinoza and the God of Monotheism. Unfortunately, this huge gap has been bridged by very few.

But here is a promise: This abyss is bridgeable, and those who do so are guaranteed to find the key to a level of awareness we all wish to have.

The God of Einstein and Spinoza may be powerful and wondrous, but is entirely oblivious to human needs and desires. Their God certainly does not hear human prayer. He does not care about our wellbeing, our happiness or our relationships (or as Yoval Noah Harari, an openly gay thinker, stated in a wonderful interview he gave at Google headquarters recently, which I quoted at length a while back: “The God that I believe in does not care at all who I have sexual relations with”).

The God of religions, on the other hand, cares a great deal. He is merciful and gracious, He gets angry and revengeful, He loves and forgives, heals, and is compassionate.

And most importantly, the God of Israel expects total loyalty from human beings.

This is exactly the spirit of Parashat Ekev. Here are the opening sentences:
“And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, the LORD your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers: He will favor you and bless you and multiply you; He will bless the issue of your womb and the produce of your soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock, in the land that He swore to your fathers to assign to you. You shall be blessed above all other peoples: there shall be no sterile male or female among you or among your livestock. The LORD will ward off from you all sickness; He will not bring upon you any of the dreadful diseases of Egypt, about which you know, but will inflict them upon all your enemies.” (D’varim 7:12-15)

Parashat Ekev’s formula is simple: if we listen and observe God’s commandments, we are guaranteed a wonderful life. And if not... well that will be very painfully clarified in this parasha, and even more so in the coming parashot.

Therefore, the question is how does one bridge the God of the scientists with the God of the religious traditions? How does one pray to the God of natural intelligence?

Parashat Ekev provides many answers to this question. Here is just one of them, but I think it is important to warn you that this topic requires much more in-depth learning than can be found in one single drasha.

In D’varim 8, verses 2-19, it says:

For the LORD your God is bringing you into a good land, a land with streams and springs and fountains issuing from plain and hill; a land of wheat and barley, of vines, figs, and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey... Take care...! 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... and you say to yourselves, “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.”

It is not that God doesn't care for His creation! Quite the reverse: it is his creation - or at least we humans - that are indifferent to God, or to the awesome intelligence permeating and sustaining our lives. Human apathy contains vanity, something between "What does God have to do with it? I did it myself!" and total blindness to the amazing miracles that take place around us, within us, and sustain every molecule, every atom, every proton and electron which we are made of.

Therefore, when I pray from a siddur, I am not thinking about a kind old man with a white beard sitting on a comfortable cloud wearing a white cloak (looking a bit like Dumbledore). Not at all. I am standing before the God of the wonder, the magic, and the miracles, because creation, nature, and human anatomy are no less than miraculous.

In my prayers I do not ask for anything in particular - wealth, health, or happiness. All I ask for is knowledge, wisdom, and understanding. I beg to feel, to really get, and - most importantly - to experience that magic, that miracle, that wonder of Creation.

This wondrous awareness is the foundation of all of the well-being, health, and happiness we can ever wish for. At the end of the day, we really don't need much in our lives - although we think we do - and when we have the feeling of the miraculous intelligence that permeates everything, then we have it all!

Even the fear of death dissolves in the powerful light of the wondrous intelligence of Creation. Indeed, even death, which is inevitable, is part of the miraculous, wonder, and magic of the infinite intelligence.

Any other understanding - that money, health, and well-being are the source of happiness in our lives, or that "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me" - is the idol worship this parasha speaks of. It is the source of our never-satiated hunger, our ongoing dissatisfaction, and all the confusion in our lives: "If you do forget the LORD your God [the magic, the intelligence which enables the existence of nature] and follow other gods to serve them or bow down to them, I warn you this day that you shall certainly perish."

The famous Israeli songwriter, Ehud Manor, z"l, wrote a song called "Like a Prayer" (long before Madonna did) in which he wrote: The God above may not hear all of what our mouths utter, but praying to God changes the one who prays.

This is the first delicate thread that bridges the God of Einstein and Spinoza with the God of the Jewish prayer book (and my guess, every prayer book).

By the way, I don't know if Einstein was familiar with this connecting thread, but Spinoza certainly was. This is why he was a happy person (contrary to what is claimed by his opponents). He was joyful, even though he had no "reason" to be. He was ostracized, hated, and persecuted! Spinoza rejected the Judaism of his time - and I can't blame him! He also rejected the Siddur. But in his writings, he knew - and felt - the presence of God's intelligence. A spiritual level very few others ever reached.

Spinoza polished eye glasses for a living.

Indeed, all we need to do is open our eyes a little bit and polish our vision. That's all. The rest you can leave to the intelligence of Creation. It is much smarter than you are.

Shabbat Shalom, a Shabbat of awareness of infinite wonder.

Elisha