



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Eikev 5780

The Dangers and Values of Being Stiff-Necked

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Recounting the sad episode of the egel disaster, Moshe reminds the Jews that they are a people of “keshei oref”- which literally translates as a stiff-necked people. This term, is employed four times in Ki Tisa, twice in Eikev, and numerous times throughout Tanach, generally referring to the character flaw of stubbornness or obstinacy. Though, typically, stubbornness is character defect, sometimes stubborn adherence to our convictions is crucial to a life of idealism.

Classically, a stiff neck describes someone unwilling to change or transform an aspect of their life or their behavior. Changing course in life demands ‘turning our heads’ to consider a new idea or a new approach. Inability to turn our heads or to change our opinions is symbolized by the image of a stiff neck. In fact, in Chapter 48, Yeshaya is so frustrated by indifference to his constant warnings to the Jews, that he actually laments their “necks of iron” which aren’t just rigid but completely immovable. Stubbornness to personal change can stem from disproportionate self-confidence or from our comfort with the “familiar”. The Rambam describes stubbornness and resistance to moral input as a “blocker” of potential teshuva. Healthy growth is almost impossible once we have stopped listening and stiffened our necks against change.

Beyond the stiffening of our necks against moral challenges, there is an additional connotation to the syndrome of ‘keshei oref’. Sometimes we actively turn our heads “away” from important values or experiences– flashing the back of our necks as we abruptly turn aside. Instead of ‘facing’ an experience and assimilating its consequences, we turn our backs and necks upon the past. Presumably, this type of turning away typifies Jewish behavior during the egel and warrants their designation as stiff-necked. By worshipping an idol, the Jews didn’t stiffen their necks

against rebuke or moral correction. What angered God and frustrated Moshe was their sudden turning away from the glory at Sinai

six weeks earlier. How could they so easily disregard the “face-to-face” communication they enjoyed with God, and swerve away to idol-worship. Sadly, human nature is fickle and cognitive dissonance compartmentalizes our experiences and creates ‘disconnect’. After moments of great inspiration, we foolishly and sometimes easily “turn our necks” elsewhere, turning our backs on the great moments and wandering. Sometimes we stiffen our necks while blocking out moral input but other times actively turn our heads away, ridiculously ignoring experiences which once captured our full attention.

However, despite the dangers of this trait, stubbornness can also be a positive quality. In his Sefer HaKuzari, Rabbi Yehuda Halevi asserts that God chose the Jews for two reasons. Firstly, we possess the unique ability to perceive prophecy and to respond to a supernatural and indiscernible world. Additionally, Jews were chosen because we are a people of uncanny resolve, not easily budged from mission or principles. Knowing that this historical calling would expose His proxies to hostility and even persecution, God selected a particularly stubborn and resilient people who would not buckle under the inevitable historical and religious pressure. Jews have outlasted anti-Semitism, in part, because we are stiff-necked. Our rabbis (Devarim Rabbah, Va’etchanan) attributed our long and storied tradition of martyrdom to our national obstinacy. Evidently, obstinate adherence to seminal ideas in the face of derision or disputation is a value. It is sometimes difficult to differentiate between healthy intellectual obstinacy and unhealthy adherence to outdated ideas. Certainly, religious ideas are fundamentally immutable and should not be overhauled as new ideas are

introduced into the human discourse. Religion is based upon “historical hierarchy”- ideas and laws established at earlier stages of history have authority over the ideas and behavior which emerge in successive generations. Those closer to the seminal moment of Sinai possess a clearer transmission and a more authoritative tradition. Ideas may be adjusted or refreshed but the core values remain unchanged. Obstinate preservation of religious truths is basic to our Masorah.

However, ideas and opinions which lie outside the direct arena of religion and halacha are meant to be fluid and adjustable. In this arena, stubbornness to old, familiar ideas and the inability to pivot or adjust can cripple personal development. It is crucial to find people who can put our “heads on a swivel” – who can introduce fresh approaches as well as different perspectives upon old ideas to assure that our thoughts remain both emotionally deep and developmentally authentic, rather than rehearsed and formulaic. Too much inflexibility to outdated ideas hampers our developmental evolution.

Furthermore, though obstinacy to religious ideals is vital in preserving our foundational religious values, stubbornness is extremely harmful in personal relationships. Healthy relationships are based upon making difficult compromises and creating ‘room’ for the differing needs of another person. Obstinate people, less likely to compromise personal habits or needs are far more likely to struggle in relationship-building. Furthermore, every relationship includes feuds and disagreements and one of the secrets of a healthy relationship is the ability to apologize for even unintentional hurt. Stubborn people are

often either too proud to apologize or oblivious to their role in the disagreement. Obstinance and pride perpetuate disagreement rather than resolving them and enabling reconciliation.

Beyond unhealthy stubbornness and obstinance, there is an additional connotation of being stiff-necked. Classic stubbornness is the inability to change our minds and the inability to turn our heads “completely around” to encounter a totally different idea. Changing our opinion would be equivalent to a 180-degree swivel- which sometimes reflects honest experience. Sometimes, however, life asks us to slightly rotate our necks to gain proportion and nuance even when retaining our previously held views. Too rigid a neck can impede these important “minor swivels” which typically lend subtlety and perspective to our opinions. Stiff-necked people remain very “frontal”, highly opinionated and oftentimes simplistic. Life is complex and people are complex and rarely can black and white positions capture the diversity of the human condition. Even those who aren’t stubborn, are often simplistic and non-nuanced in adopting views and opinions. Elastic necks are necessary to help us understand the validity of differing approaches to life. We inhabit a very polarized world and are becoming fanatical of black and white thought. The stiffer our necks, the more exclusive we believe our truths to be, and the less sensitive we are to the diversity of human experience. Religious truths demand inflexible necks, but interpersonal relationships and the process of forming opinions are better served by “supple necks” which are capable of both minor swivels as well as fuller rotations..

Destroying Idols, Eradicating Anger

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week’s parsha, Parshas Eikev, the Torah warns us regarding the sin of avodah zarah (worshipping gods of others). The pasukim say:

פְּסִלֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶם, תִּשְׂרֹפוּן בְּאֵשׁ; לֹא-תִחַמְדוּ כֶסֶף וְזָהָב עֲלֵיהֶם, וְלָקַחְתָּ לָךְ--פֶּן תִּנְקֹשׁ בוֹ, כִּי תֹעֲבֹת ה' אֱלֹקֶיךָ הוּא -

The carved images of their (foreign) gods you shall burn in the fire; you shall not covet and take for yourself the silver and gold that is on them, lest you be ensnared by it, for it is an abomination of Hashem, your G-d;

לֹא-תִבִּיא תֹעֲבָה אֶל-בֵּיתְךָ וְהֵייתָ חָרָם כְּמֹהוּ שִׁקְץ תִּשְׂקָצוּן וְתֵעֵב תִּתְעַבְּבוּ כִּי-חָרָם הוּא:

And you shall not bring an abomination into your home, and become banned like it, you shall utterly detest it, and you shall utterly abhor it; for it is banned (Devarim 7:26).

Sforno comments:

כי חרם הוא שלא בלבד יקרה שלא תצליח בו, אבל יחרים את שאר נכסֶיךָ

For it is banned: It is not only that you will not experience success if you keep the accoutrements of the idols, but owning them, and bringing them into your house, will bring destruction upon all your other possessions.

R’ Dr. Abraham J. Twerski writes, “The Torah instructs

the Israelites to destroy the gold and silver accessories of idol worship that they find when they enter Canaan. These items are cherem (banned), and anyone possessing them will similarly be banned.

“Sforno comments that possession of objects used in pagan rites will bring ruination to all one’s possessions.

“The Gemara says that if one goes into a rage, it is equivalent of idol worship (Shabbos 105b). The above restriction (regarding the gold and silver accessories of idols), therefore, applies to rage as well. Rage is an abomination. Do not bring it into your home.

“When R’ Zeira’s students asked him to what he ascribed his longevity, he said, ‘I never expressed anger in my home’ (Megillah 28b). It may at times be necessary to reprimand and even sharply rebuke someone for doing wrong, and this may give the appearance of anger. But this should be an outward manifestation rather than a true rage response.

“Sforno’s comment applies to rage as well as to idolatry. Rage is never constructive and is always ruinous. The Gemara says that rage deprives a wise person of wisdom and a prophet of prophecy. Furthermore, Chazal teach that: כל הכועס כל מיני גיהנם שולטין בו, All the forces of Gehenom dominate someone in rage (Nedarim 22a). What could be more ruinous? Rage is so destructive that on three occasions it distorted Moshe’s judgement (see Rashi to Bamidbar 31:21), and according to the Rambam, was the transgression which resulted in Moshe’s not being permitted to enter the Promised Land (see Ramban to Bamidbar 20:8 where the Rambam is quoted at length).

“בְּנִחָת נִשְׁמָעִים, דְּבַרֵי חֲכָמִים, *the words of the wise are heard because they are said with calm* (Koheles 9:17). One may think that the gold and silver items of idol worship are valuable and can enrich one’s life. Sforno teaches us that the very opposite is true; they will only bring ruination. Similarly, one might think that shouting achieves obedience. Quite the contrary. Even if it produces momentary compliance, it will, inevitably, turn the listener against the enraged person.

“There is nothing more precious than life. R’ Zeira teaches us that we may preserve and extend our lives by avoiding rage” (Twerski on Chumash, p.380).

The Sages teach (Pirkei Avos 5:14)

אַרְבַּע מִדּוֹת בְּדַעוֹת: נוֹחַ לְכַעֵס וְנוֹחַ לְרַצוֹת, יֵצֵא הֶפְסְדוֹ בְּשִׁכְרוֹ, קָשָׁה לְכַעֵס וְקָשָׁה לְרַצוֹת, יֵצֵא שִׁכְרוֹ בְּהֶפְסְדוֹ. קָשָׁה לְכַעֵס וְנוֹחַ לְרַצוֹת,

There are four types of temperaments. (a) One who is easily angered and easily appeased, his gain is offset by his loss (The positive aspect of such a person’s character is offset by the negative aspect of his being easily provoked; a moment of anger causes damage that cannot be erased by easy subsequent appeasement.) (b) One whom it is difficult to anger and difficult to appease, his loss is offset by his gain. (c) One whom it is difficult to anger and is easily appeased, is a chassid, a pious person. (d) One who is easily angered and is difficult to appease, is a rasha, wicked person (Translation and commentary from Siddur Ohel Sarah, Artsroll, p. 566-567).

Not only is it forbidden to bring gold and silver accessories of idols into our homes, but it is forbidden to bring anger and wrath into our homes. As the Sages teach, it will bring ruination upon us and our families, R”L, and anger cancels out any positive virtues we may have.

In regard to the saintly, pious Chafetz Chaim zt”l (1838 – 1933) a story is told, “At midnight a sound of alarm and crying was heard, emanating from the walls of the beis medrash in Radin. The people on the street walked toward the window of the beis medrash, and saw that it was R’ Yisrael Meir Ha’Kohen, the saintly Chafetz Chaim, crying from the depths of his heart. ‘RS”O - Master of the Universe! I want so much to distance myself from anger. But I am afraid that I, Yisrael Meir, a kohen, will be one about whom our Sages teach that ‘kohanim are an irate brood.’ Therefore, please G-d, strengthen and fortify me, that I shall be able to conquer the anger implanted in me, לֵב טָהוֹר, בְּרָא-לִי אֱלֹקִים, וְרוּחַ נְכוֹן, חֲדָשׁ בְּקִרְבִי - a pure heart, G-d, please create within me, and a steadfast spirit renew within me (Tehilim 51:12)” (Tales of the Righteous, p.2-3).

If the tzaddik, chassid, tamim v’yoshor, the Chafetz Chaim, davened that G-d should help him overcome his anger, what might we - simple folk - say? It is no wonder that the Sages teach: Who is a mighty warrior? One who conquers his (evil) inclination (Avos 4:1).

Let us remember that not only are the gold and silver of idols banned and to be destroyed, but so is anger and fury. For if we do not destroy it, it will surely destroy us!

May we merit the shalom and simcha that come along with tranquility of soul and purity of speech.

Grateful Living

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

Dr. Jeffrey Froh, a psychologist at Hofstra University, is one of the leading gratitude researchers in the country. As part of his quest to increase levels of gratitude in students, he designed a curriculum that helps develop the thought processes people have in relation to gratitude. He delineates three “grateful thinking” strategies that can enhance the experience of gratitude. The first is to consider the intent of the benefactor. The second is to take into account the cost incurred by the benefactor. The third is that the recipient contemplates the extent of the benefits that he or she accrued. Middle school students in his research study that were taught this curriculum and practiced thinking about these three components, had increased gratitude, increased well-being, and exhibited more gratitude behaviors than students in a control group.

Over the course of his farewell address to Bnei Yisrael, Moshe was intent on making them aware of two potential dangers lurking once they entered the land of Israel. The first was external. Bnei Yisrael should beware of the other cultures and nations around them. Those nations’ debasement, primarily framed in terms of idol worship, could leak out and impact Bnei Yisrael to the point where Bnei Yisrael could potentially reject G-d and Torah. The second was internal. Material success could lead to arrogance, and arrogance to the forgetting of G-d. “Your heart will become haughty and you will forget (“veshachachta”) the Lord, your G-d, who took you out of Egypt” (Devarim 8:14). The pesukim continue the list of things besides the Exodus Bnei Yisrael will forget: that G-d guided and protected them in the desert, and that he conducted miracles to provide them food and water. The remedy for external dangers is to reject the foreign cultures. Is the antidote to arrogance to discourage material wealth?

This solution hardly seems likely from the context. The promise of the land of Israel has always been framed within the context of material wealth – after all, it is the land that flows with milk and honey. What then is the corrective course of action to prevent the arrogance that seems to flow from economic success? Perhaps the answer

is embedded in a reinterpretation of the pasuk above. The letter “vov” of “veshachachta” can mean either and or because. Instead of reading it that “Your heart will become haughty and you will forget the Lord,” we can read it, “Your heart will become haughty because you will forget the Lord.” Forgetting and ingratitude serve as the intervening variables that stand in between material success and arrogance. Success is not the cause of arrogance and lack of success is not the salve. Rather, arrogance is rooted in forgetting, and forgetting in ingratitude.

Ibn Ezra colors in the forgotten emotional experience behind these historical events. They will forget how lowly of spirit they were when they were slaves, before G-d saved them. They will forget the pain and suffering they experienced in the desert, before G-d provided the miracles. Rabbi Mordechai Gifter (Pirkei Emunah, p. 74) expands on Ibn Ezra’s comments and finds an essential lesson to help deepen our experience of gratitude: When G-d or another person does something that benefits us, it is insufficient to just say thank you. True gratitude requires “grateful thinking” as well. We must contemplate the essence of the good that was bestowed upon us. Consequently, we are required to reflect on the situation that we were in before we received the benefit. This is the only way to fully appreciate the depths of the gratitude owed. Moshe was cautioning Bnei Yisrael not to forget the good G-d has and will perform, which requires them to meditate on the pain and suffering that they encountered before being saved.

To protect against the arrogance that material success can bring, we need to be grateful. Yet, we cannot fulfill our obligation of gratitude with a quick and trite thank you. If we want to truly experience gratitude we need to step back and analyze using “grateful thinking” strategies. To fully appreciate what we have, we must vividly recall the lack we experienced before we received that benefit. By working on this cognitive exercise, we can deepen our thankfulness to G-d for all He provides and enhance our gratefulness to those around us who enrich our lives.

We Cannot Live Without Them

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

While the era of the manna was coming to an end, its role in transforming the Jewish nation was still being discussed in the final years of the Jewish sojourn through the wilderness. In the Torah portion of Eikev, Moshe exhorts the Jewish people (Devarim 8:2-3):

“And you shall remember the entire way on which the Lord, your God, led you these forty years in the desert, in order to afflict you to test you, to know what is in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. And He afflicted you and let you go hungry, and then fed you with manna, which you did not know, nor did your forefathers know, so that He would make you know that man does not live by bread alone, but rather by, whatever comes forth from the mouth of the Lord does man live.”

Ramban takes these two verses and draws a connection between them. He begins somewhat cryptically:

“[The Torah] is saying that [through remembering your days in the Wilderness] you will be able to know that through the performance of the commandments that there is complete goodness, and there will not be ‘a righteous man forsaken, nor his children begging for bread’”

Ramban then introduces his approach:

“For God provided sustenance for you in the Wilderness through great miraculous means, due to you following his commandments”

The sustenance he is referring to was the manna.

Ramban expands his insight:

“... that it was a great trial for them, for they did not know [of] any [subsistence] plans for themselves, yet they entered the great Wilderness, which was not a place of bread.”

Why was this done?

“And [Moshe] explained that [God] did this in order to inform you that it is He who preserves the life of man with whatever He decrees; if so, observe His commandments and live”

It would appear, according to Ramban, that the manna was the test, and the passing grade would be the subsequent following of the commandments. The basis for this causal relationship should be understood, as one does not seem to follow from the other.

Moving forward, Ramban explains how the avot, or forefathers, never received any information about the

future manna; thus, there was no tradition the Jewish people were aware of regarding this miracle. He then offers a different explanation:

“... that [God] has done with you this great kindness that [even] your holy forefathers did not achieve [by their merits].”

Ramban elucidates, suggesting that even though the forefathers followed whatever God commanded, they were not on a high enough spiritual level that would warrant God sustaining them with something such as the manna.

The obvious question here is the implication of the lowered status of the forefathers to the current Jewish nation in the desert. A brief review of some of the clear lack of faith exhibited by the Jews in the desert would easily belie Ramban's claim.

There is an inconsistency present in this entire line of thinking. It would appear the manna was only formulated to “encourage” the Jewish people to follow the commandments from that point on. Clearly, the presentation of the ideological supremacy of the commandments was insufficient. The avot certainly did not suffer from this problem, and therefore the idea of them requiring the manna would be absurd. And yet, Ramban writes that not receiving the manna was reflective of their lower status in comparison to the Jewish people of the time. How do we reconcile this?

There is one last question that should be asked. What was it about the manna, as opposed to the other miracles (such as the plagues or the splitting of the Red Sea), that would be the phenomenon leading to a complete acceptance of the commandments?

When we look at the other miracles, what they shared in common was the imminent threat to the Jewish people and the subsequent rescuing by God. The normative response to such a salvation is a sense of a debt of gratitude. God saved the Jewish people, and they would do as He says because they were rescued. However, the issue is that over time, the feeling of what was owed would dissipate, and the attachment to the commandments would falter along with it. God chooses a different venue.

The environment of the desert, as presented by Ramban, has an almost experimental feel to it. The Jewish people were being placed in a unique situation, where they would have no access to food. It is important to emphasize that

they were not in danger, as there were other paths they could have travelled, all with towns that had supplies. What God was therefore designing was a method to create a specific type of dependency on the part of the Jewish people.

As we know, the idea of being a dependent existence is one that challenges our very core sense of importance. We would like to think we are truly independent, that our decisions are made in a vacuum, and that our ability to survive and thrive is in our hands. While we do exhibit some degree of control, the reality is our existences are essentially dependent. We can only exist because of God. God sought to create this very sense of dependency in the desert. He wanted the Jewish people to experience the idea of a direct dependence on God, where their existences were clearly in God's "hands". Creating a means of sustenance via the manna accomplished this objective.

Why was this so critical? God wanted to teach the Jewish people a foundation of the commandments. A great challenge of the commandments would be for the Jewish people to view them as more than a set of rules. Our very existence as a nation was tied to the Torah. The dependency exhibited via the manna would be transferred to the relationship we were required to have to the Torah. Experiencing this dependency would etch into our consciousness the way we needed to relate to the Torah as a whole.

This explains the relationship presented by Ramban.

Ramp Up Your Home Base

Rabbi Chananya Berzon

Perek 8 of Parshat Ekev opens with Moshe Rabbeinu addressing כלל ישראל, the Jewish People, regarding their history, what they're facing in the present, and where they will be going in the future. The pesukim read:

And remember the entire way in which the Lord, your G-d led you these forty years in the desert in order to afflict you, to test you, to know what is in your heart; whether you would keep His commandments, or not. And He afflicted you, and let you go hungry, and then fed you with manna that you did not know, and that your forefathers did not know, so that He would not live by bread alone, but whatever comes forth from the mouth of the Lord, G-d, does man live. (8:2-4)

In the Netziv's footnotes, known as the Harchev Davar,

Clearly, presenting the philosophical benefits of the Torah was insufficient to ensure the long-term commitment by the Jewish people. The avot, of course, did not have the same challenge, making the manna something unnecessary for them. Ramban is pointing out that while it may be true they did not need the environment of dependence established by God, they were still missing out on something quite remarkable. Existing in a state where one is acutely aware of one's dependence on God is an extraordinary phenomenon. Our general state of life puts us in conflict with this ideal, and we must battle our sense of self importance in order to recognize our true relationship to God. The avot may not have had this conflict to the extent of the average person, but it was present. To live an extended period without such a conflict was a tremendous opportunity. Ramban seems to be emphasizing to the reader that while it is true there was a need for the manna "experiment", one should understand the powerful growth its effect had on the Jewish people as a whole.

Creating a scenario of complete dependence on God made it clear what was on the line when it came to adhering to the Torah. The lesson the manna served then, and should still serve today, is to remind us of how our existence and identity as a Jewish nation is solely dependent on the covenant established through the Torah. The commandments are not mere rules; they are what give us life.

he refers to a pasuk in Tehillim that relates to our Parsha:

ה' יְתֵר־אֱמֶר הַמְבַשְׂרוֹת צָבָא רַב: יִגְמְלֵכִי צְבָאוֹת יְדִדּוֹן וְגִדּוֹן וְגִוֹת בֵּית תְּחִלָּק שָׁלָל:

My Master gives promise; is harbingers are a great host: Kings of armies flee; and that dwells within the house apportions the spoils (Psalms 68, 12-13)

The Netziv comments that the prayers and brachot will be the source of blessing to all of the world's nations wherein the Jews dwell. The Jewish family, those that dwell within the house, is what the phrase וְגִוֹת בֵּית is referring to. When it says יְתֵר־אֱמֶר ה', it should be understood as ה' יְתֵן יְאֶמֶר - *yomar*, in place of *omer* - i.e. tefillot and brachot, prayer and blessing. The Netziv is writing that the tefillot and the brachot will be a source of blessing for the entire

world; the *nevat bayit*, נֵוֶת בַּיִת, is unique to the Jewish family.

The Netziv concludes his comment in the Harchev Davar :

נמצא שביאר הנביא הליכות חיי ישראל בזמן שאינם בארץ ישראל
הוא ע"י שהקב"ה יתן אומר המשפיע ברכה

The directions and the style of the Jewish people when they're not dwelling in Eretz Yisrael will be because Hashem gives the influence of brachot.

In essence, the Netziv is imparting the concept of ה'קב"ה's everlasting message to the People of Israel and to all of the world - the Jewish people lived in the desert supernaturally for forty years, and they'll continue on to survive wondrously if they remember the concept of נֵוֶת בַּיִת, nevat bayit, what is unique about the Jewish home. When that happens, your prayers and brachot will not exist only inside your house, but rather continue on to proliferate and impact the entire world.

Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch comments on Psalms 68:13-14, "God has sounded forth His promise to mankind, "Kings of hosts, despite all their power, will quickly depart from the proscenium of history," says the Lord. But "she who dwells within the house"; namely, the nation which fulfills its destiny in the quiet, simple practice of the "home virtues," will emerge victoriously in the end of time, and will distribute the "booty" of its victory. Even

the purely cultural achievements in the arts and sciences recorded by the other nations will have true and beneficial value only if they are coupled with virtues taught and practiced by this בית נוח, and only if they are used as means to the fulfillment of those ends that are part of the Divine plan for man's destiny.

Perhaps the silver lining in this coronavirus outbreak, and specifically in its quarantine, is a message to the entire world, that is predominantly focused toward the Jewish people. It's an important message that has been somewhat lost. That is, reinvigorate the nevat bayit; make your home a healthy one! Through the vehicle of this chapter of Tehillim, ה'קב"ה is establishing that taking these actions will be a blessing for you and the entire world.

This is an extension of עם לבדד ישכון, 'a nation that dwells in solitude' (במדבר כד:ט), and strongly relates to our current time period where we continue to spend more time in our homes. Let's make our homes a place of strong relationships, and share with your family love, Torah concepts, and ideals. Mankind at large is perplexed, so let us have our People become the guiding light who will show the world the true way to salvation, via the *nevat bayit*.

Kings of armies flee, and she who dwells and nurtures the home will be the salvation for the entire world; בעזרת. ה' בקרוב בימינו אמן!

Feast or Famine—What Judaism Says About Food

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this week's parasha, parashat Eikev, the Torah dwells, in part, on the specialness of food.

In Deuteronomy 8:3, G-d recalls that, in the wilderness, He gave the Jewish people manna from heaven to eat:

למען הודיעך כי לא על הלחם לבדו יחיה האדם כי על כל מוצא פי
השם יחיה האדם

All this, says G-d, was done in order to make you [Israel] aware that man does not live on bread alone, but by whatever G-d decrees.

The Torah, in Deuteronomy 8:7-10, movingly describes G-d's intention to bring the Jewish people to a good land—a land of streams of waters, springs, and deep wells flowing forth from the valleys and the mountains. The Torah goes on to say that the land where G-d promises to bring the people is a most fruitful land of wheat, barley, vines, figs,

and pomegranates, a land of oil-producing olives and date nectar. In the new land in which the people will dwell, the people will not eat bread in poverty, nor will they lack anything... to the contrary, they will eat and be satisfied, and then shall bless G-d the L-rd, the eternal G-d, for the good land that He gave the people.

There is a rather amusing saying that has been circulating for years that declares: All of Jewish history can probably be subsumed in one simple statement: "Our enemies tried to destroy us. They failed. Let's eat!"

There is a perception out there, true or false, that Jews like to eat. Yes, food does play a special role in Judaism. The Talmud in Brachot 58a, quotes Ben Zoma, who said: "Look how many labors Adam had to perform before he obtained bread to eat. He plowed, he sowed, he reaped, he bound (sheaves), he threshed and winnowed, and selected

the ears, he ground (them) and sifted the (flour), he kneaded, and baked, and then, at last, he ate. Whereas, I get up in the morning and find all these things done for me!”

As Rabbi Joseph Hertz, the late Chief Rabbi of England, has written, “Judaism spiritualized the act of eating as part of the process of hallowing daily life.” Furthermore, Rabbi Hertz points out, the laws of food are a major religious practice in Judaism and constitute an invaluable training in self-mastery. The ultimate reason for this emphasis, is so that Jews may sanctify themselves and be holy, for, says the Torah in Leviticus 11:44, “I, G-d, am holy.”

Surely, the dietary laws of Israel have proven to be an important factor in the survival of the Jewish people. Jews abstain from forbidden foods, not because of personal aversions, but because our Father in Heaven ordained it. When Jews eat, they offer thanksgiving to G-d before and after every meal. This raises a meal from a mere gratification of a physical craving, to a spiritual experience and religious act. Since a meal is like a sacred offering brought on the altar, Jews, like the priests and Levites of old, always wash their hands before eating bread, the staple of the meal.

Maimonides, in his Code of Jewish Law, Laws of Kings, 6:10, speaks of the prohibition of *בל תשחית* — Bal Tash’chit—wanton wastefulness, clearly stating that it is not only strictly forbidden to destroy fruit trees, but whoever breaks vessels, tears clothes, demolishes a building, stops up a fountain or wastes food in a destructive way, commits an offense against the Torah law of “Thou shall not destroy,” (Deuteronomy 20:19).

The Code of Jewish Law underscores the importance of food by declaring that feeding the hungry takes precedence over clothing the naked. When a naked person claims to need clothes, the truthfulness of the claim must first be verified. However, one doesn’t inspect the veracity of a

person who comes and says, “feed me.” Those who claim hunger are fed instantly, says the Code of Jewish Law.

The Code continues,

A city with Jewish inhabitants must establish a charity fund of known and reliable people who will collect from all those [residents] capable of giving, to properly assess the amount they must give. Each week, from Shabbat to Shabbat the charity committee distributes the monies and give to each poor person enough to suffice for seven days. This is called *kupah* (charity fund).

Similarly, officials are appointed to collect daily from each courtyard and neighborhood, bread, assorted food stuffs, fruit, or cash, from those who donate spontaneously. At night the collection is distributed among the poor, and each poor person is given a single day’s sustenance. This is called *תַּמְחֻי* –Tamchui (soup kitchen). The Code even testifies that, “we have never seen or heard of a single Jewish community without a charity fund.”

There is a remarkable law, one that is not well known in Jewish life. The Code of Jewish Law, 169:1, records, that any food that has an aroma and arouses one’s appetite that is brought by a servant or waiter before a person, must be served to the servant immediately, and it is considered meritorious to serve the servant of all foods. The Mishnah Berurah cites a gloss that says that latter authorities have ruled that even if a condition of the hiring was that the master be free of the requirement to feed the servant first, the clause has no efficacy.

Now we can truly see why food is so central in Jewish life and Jewish law. It is not only a staple of life, it is a staple of Jewish faith and a key element in developing sensitivity and proper moral and ethical behavior.