Happiness Is All Perspective

This week's parsha, Eikev, tells us how Hashem tested the Jewish people with the manna. "And He afflicted you and made you hungry and fed you 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 Hashem does man live." Then it says, "Who fed you manna in the desert, which your forefathers did not know, in order to afflict you and in order to test you, to benefit you in your end, and you will say to yourself, 'My strength and the might of my hand that made all this wealth for me.' But you must remember Hashem your G-d, for it is He that gives you strength to make wealth..."

How could the manna, "bread from heaven," which was totally G-dly, fed them for forty years in the desert and had every flavor, serve as a means to test and challenge the Jewish people?

How did the manna afflict them?

In general, there are two kinds of tests or challenges, the test of affluence and the test of poverty. The manna had both of these characteristics. On one hand, it was G-dly, had every flavor, and the Talmud tells us that when they went to collect the manna, they would find with it precious stones and gems, so it came with both spiritual and physical wealth. On the other hand, the verse says, "Who fed you manna... in order to afflict you."

The Talmud tells us two opinions as to why it caused them to suffer. It never gave them complete satisfaction, either because they were only able to collect it for one day at a time, tomorrow was uncertain, and "You can't compare one who has bread in his basket, to one who doesn't have bread in his basket." When you have food, you are less hungry, because you have the security of knowing that you can eat whenever you want to. Or because although it tasted like anything, it didn't look like the food they were tasting, and "You can't compare one who sees (his food) and eats, to one who doesn't see (his food) and eats." (Like Crystal Pepsi.)

Although they had the most amazing G-dly food, they weren't satisfied, either because they couldn't hold on to it, or because it didn't have the right look. But these flaws are not real, they were only perceived flaws.

The same is true about the study of Torah, compared to other subjects. Other subjects are limited, you can master the subject, and that is very satisfying. However Torah is unlimited, no matter how much you know, you are left wanting more, its completeness is elusive. The more you know, the more hungry you are for another angle, deeper, higher, etc.

The same is true within Torah itself. On one hand, you have the revealed Torah (Mishnah, Talmud, Halacha, etc.), which although it is Hashem's infinite wisdom, being that it comes to the world dressed in physical cases and scenarios, its study can sometimes leave you satisfied. On the other hand, the hidden or inner Torah (Chassidus, Kabbalah, etc.) is Hashem's pure infinite wisdom, it's not dressed up in the physical, the more you know, the more hungry you are for deeper, higher, etc.

The hunger for Torah and especially the inner Torah, is only in your perception, you perceive that there is more, so you are hungry.

That means that the only true flaw is in the one who is perceiving it. The way to overcome these flaws is to go out of himself, nullify his own existence to Hashem, then his perception will be Hashem's, where everything is good and truly satisfying.

The same is true for the manna. How did one find satisfaction in the manna? He had to know that the manna was pure infinite G-dliness that came into the physical world and given to him as a gift from Hashem. if he will humble himself, nullify himself, totally negate his own existence and see that it's all from Hashem, he will truly be happy and satisfied.

Because everything that comes from Him is good, there are no flaws.

Now we will understand why it continues. "And you will say to yourself, 'My strength and the might of my hand that made all this wealth for me.' But you must remember Hashem your G-d, for it is He that gives you strength to make wealth..." Because the manna served as the paradigm for true happiness and satisfaction, the recognition and the true perception that everything he has is from Hashem.

When he has this perspective, everything in life becomes good. Since he is humble, he sees not only the spiritual, but also the physical is good and holy, there is no difference, because it is all from Hashem.

The same could be applied to our daily lives. Many of us struggle with happiness, we are often dissatisfied with the hand that we have been dealt. It is all based on your perspective and perception. When faced with a challenge, if you think that it is all your doing or man's doing, "my strength and the might of my hand that has made all this wealth," then you are truly in the hole of unhappiness, self pity and self loathing, but when you recognize that it is all from Hashem, "for it is He that gives you strength to make wealth," then you could find meaning in any situation or at least the knowledge that it is from Hashem, will take away your self pity and self loathing, and you will be happy with yourself.

I recognize that sometimes we are presented with such a devastating challenge that no amount of positive thinking will soothe the pain. But knowing that it is from Hashem will make things a little bit easier.

Happiness doesn't mean that you walk around with a smile all day, it means that you are satisfied with yourself and your situation, and that is based on your perspective.

I have been asked: How do you stay positive through the devastating challenge that you are faced with, ALS and being paralyzed? The hardest things for me, is not being able to be the father and husband that I want to, I struggle with that every day. Though I know that I can't do anything to fix the situation, barring a miracle from Hashem. It hurts not to be able to kiss and hug my children, not to be able to talk and play with them. But as far as everything else is concerned, I say, "What keeps me going, is the realization that Hashem is real, that He has a plan for the world, and I am a part of it. Everyone is a part of it, and everyone's part is important. So if He put me in this position, He must want something of me that I can only do in this position. When you see it this way. Instead of feeling down when you are in a challenging situation, you are filled with a sense of purpose, and you are lifted up."

May all our suffering come to an end, with the coming of Moshiach. May he come soon.

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What Is The Value Of A Mitzvah?

This week's parsha, Eikev, begins, "V'haya eikev tishmeun," which means, "And it will be, (eikev) because you will listen." Then it lists a bunch of blessings that we will get for listening. Listening means doing what Hashem wants.

The word used to say "because," is "eikev," which is not the normal word used to say this, in fact, it is not a common word to use at all. It is obvious that the Torah is trying to hint something by using this strange word. What is it trying to tell us?

Rashi explains that the word eikev could also mean a heel, and he says that the words in the verse mean, "If you will keep the less important mitzvahs, that get trampled by a person's heel." The source of his explanation is from the Midrash, which says, "Less important mitzvahs that people aren't careful with, rather, they cast them under their heels."

The words of Rashi are clear, he talks about mitzvahs that are trampled on, which is what a heel does, it steps on things. However, we have to understand the words of the Midrash, because if someone casts away a mitzvah, he is throwing it

away, what is the difference if it is under his heel or not? What is the Midrash trying to tell us by adding that it is under the heels?

The Midrash continues to say, that this is the meaning of what King David said, "Why should I fear in the days of misfortune? The iniquity of (akeivai) my heels surround me." David was saying that he wasn't afraid "of the strict mitzvahs of the Torah," rather, "of the less important mitzvahs, perhaps I didn't keep one of them... because it was less important, and you said to be careful with a lenient mitzvah as (you would) with a strict one."

Surely David kept all the mitzvahs, even the lenient ones, the Midrash actually continues to say so, bringing David's words, "Also Your servant was careful with them, (eikev) because in observing them, there is much reward." So what does he mean by saying that he is afraid because of his inobservance of the less important mitzvahs?

The Midrash is not talking about a person who thinks that you shouldn't keep the less important mitzvahs at all, on the contrary, he thinks that you should keep them, and for the most part, he does. It is just that he "casts them under the heels," meaning, he pushes them off later and later, until after the heel, meaning, that they come at the very end.

He has a very good reason for doing this. He argues, "first I have to make sure that the head is in order, meaning, the strict mitzvahs, then the less strict mitzvahs, after I am done with them, if I have time, I will take care of the heel, the less important mitzvahs, and perhaps after that I will do the extras that beautify a mitzvah, or go beyond what is expected according to the letter of the law. There is an order that one should follow, and that is what I am doing."

He argues, "What do you expect from me, I'm not ready for it yet, let me do the basics, the biggies, and after I am used to them, I will think about the small stuff."

He even comes up with a clever anecdote, "You say that a Jew has to love another Jew, even if he has never met him before, I am having a hard enough time with the ones I know. It is like someone who is not wearing a shirt, but he has a tie around his neck."

Sounds logical, however, if you want to have the blessings in our parsha, the Midrash tells us that we have to keep the heel mitzvahs, and David was afraid of not keeping these mitzvahs well enough. It seems that these mitzvahs are super important, but they are called lenient, or less important mitzvahs. How are we to make sense of this?

There are two ways to approach mitzvahs. You can come from a position of understanding, in this approach, there is an order to the mitzvahs, some are stricter than others. Then there is doing what Hashem wants, from a position of accepting his yoke, to do the mitzvahs, "because He commanded us," and because when you do a mitzvah, you are connecting to the essence of Hashem. As it is explained, mitzvah is related to the word tzavsa, which means a connection. Every time you do a mitzvah, you are connecting with Hashem's essence. From this approach, it doesn't matter which mitzvah you are doing, every mitzvah is Hashem's will, every mitzvah connects you to His essence equally.

The question is: Which one of these approaches are more in line with Jewish values? The parsha, the Midrash and King David are telling you that you should keep the heel mitzvahs, as you would keep the head mitzvahs, they are all the same. And if we follow this approach, we receive the amazing blessings found in our parsha.

This is a general idea in Judaism. Belief and faith must come before understanding. When we stood at Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, we said, "We will do and we will listen." Doing Hashem's will and connecting with His essence is first and most important. Understanding is also important, but it's second.

The previous Lubavitcher Rebbe, once hired a teacher for his children. This teacher was of the opinion that children shouldn't be told stories of wonders and miracles until they were older and already had a firm knowledge in Torah. When his father, the Rebbe Rashab, who was the Rebbe at the time, found out the teacher's opinion, he was quickly sent on his way. Because it is the stories of wonders and miracles that imbue the children with belief and faith in Hashem. In other words, belief has to come before understanding.

The evil inclination is clever and he always comes up with a strategy, and this one is a good one. He tells you to do everything, but use your intellect, and follow the order of things. But that is because he is the evil inclination, and he doesn't want you to connect with Hashem's essence.

And this is why we receive the blessings if we take this approach. Because when we serve Hashem from our understanding, measured and calculated, then He grants our needs in a measured and calculated way, which is not what we want. However, when we serve Hashem beyond our understanding, when we accept the yoke of Heaven and do the mitzvahs because it is His will and because we want to connect with Him, then he gives us uncalculated blessings, infinite and beyond understanding.

How do you balance between beyond understanding and order? Beyond understanding doesn't have to mean chaos, rather, when you have an opportunity to do a mitzvah, don't start to make calculations, big or small, biblical or rabbinical, whether it is an enactment from the Men of the Great Assembly at the beginning of the Second Temple era, the generations that followed or even from the last generation, it is all Hashem's will, so do it with your whole heart. We also should not convince ourselves of doing things that Hashem doesn't want, under some logical pretext, to have a personal gain. Hashem's will should be our goal and what we strive for.

If we act with belief and faith in Hashem, the way he wants us to, He will surely bestow His infinite blessings upon us, and He will give us the ultimate blessing that we long and hope for, the coming of Moshiach. May he come soon.

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Going Beyond The Natural

In this week's parsha, Eikev, we have the second paragraph of the shema. In it, Hashem says, "And I will give your land's rain in its time." Rashi explains the words, "And I will give your land's rain," that Hashem is saying to the Jewish people, "You did what was upon you, I will also do what is upon Me." In other words, because we do what Hashem wants, he will do his part, by giving us the rain we need.

Rashi comes to explain difficulties in the simple meaning of the Torah. What is the difficulty in this verse that Rashi is clarifying?

In a previous parsha, Bechukosai, Hashem says, "And I will give their rain, in their time." The question on our verse is, what is the difference between the blessing of rain in Bechukosai and in our parsha? Rashi explains that over here it means, "You did what was upon you, I will also do what is upon Me." In other words, you did just what was asked of you, so I will keep my end of the bargain, and send the natural rain that you need. However in Bechukosai, the blessing is beyond the natural, as we see in the continuation of the blessing, "And the tree of the field will give its fruit," Rashi explains that it is talking about plain trees that don't normally give fruit, in the future they too will give fruit, which is not natural, rather above the natural.

Why is the blessing in Bechukosai greater? Because as Rashi explains on the words, "Im Bechukosai tailaichu, if you will go in my statutes," means that you should toil in Torah. Toil means going beyond your norm, putting in effort that is beyond your nature, so the blessing Hashem gives is also beyond nature.

How does Rashi know that in our parsha the blessing is within nature and not above nature? Because the verse says, "And I will give your land's

rain," the rain is the land's, land is within nature. In Bechukosai it says, "And I will give their rain," meaning, the Jewish people's rain, and Jewish people are above nature, so the rain is also above nature.

How does this blessing of rain manifest itself? In our parsha Rashi explains the word "B'ito, in its time," at night, so you won't be bothered. In other words, you won't be bothered by the rain during the day when you are working in the field, but the rain will be the natural amount necessary for the fields to produce its crop. In Bechukosai Rashi explains the word "B'itam, in their time," at the time that it is uncommon for people to go out like Shabbos night (Friday night). Meaning that it will rain one night a week, and with that small amount of rain the fields will yield their full potential, which is beyond the natural.

So the blessing in Bechukosai is greater, because our effort is greater.

We need to strive for the greater blessing, it is not enough for us to get by with what comes natural to us. Hashem expects more from us, to go beyond our nature, to toil in Torah and mitzvahs, to go the extra mile.

In a way, doing just enough, just what is in our nature, is not an accomplishment, it is when we go beyond our nature, that we've accomplished. Hashem wants us to go beyond our nature, and when we do that, He showers us with blessings beyond the natural.

Every day I see this as my wife Dina goes beyond herself for our family and to give to others. I used to do a lot for our family, but now stuck in bed, it has all fallen on her shoulders. It is a daily struggle for her, but she finds a way to do it, through tears and love she supernaturally does it all. I am amazed by her everyday, she is a Jewish mother, a miracle, and my hero.

On top of that, she goes all over giving talks, strengthening people, lifting their spirits, and filling them with emunah and bitachon (belief and trust in Hashem). But what many don't know, is that she has terrible stage fright, but she fights through it, because she knows that this is what Hashem wants from her. I find that amazing and I am in awe of her.

We all have it in us to go beyond ourselves to do what Hashem wants, He created us to do just that, and when we do, we are doing what we are meant to do, and that brings supernatural blessing.

May our efforts and toil, going beyond the natural bring the greatest blessing of all, the coming of Moshiach. May he come soon.

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Haftarah: We Want Hashem And Nothing Less

This week's Haftora is the second Haftora of consolation. It begins "And Zion said, 'Hashem has forsaken me...'" It follows last week's Haftora, Nachamu Nachamu, the doubled consoling. It seems strange that after a doubled consoling, Zion should be saying, "Hashem has forsaken me."

Being that our great sages set up the Haftoras this way, we must conclude that there is something happening here. Why is it, that after a doubled consoling, we are left feeling alone?

Let me explain.

Sometimes you can feel alone even when you are with the one you love, especially when they are acting distant.

After the doubled consoling of last week, we, as the Jewish people begin to realize our self worth, that we are Hashem's beloved and that we are one with Him. If so, the question arises, why is Hashem sending His prophets to console us? Why does He not console us Himself? This is now taken as a rejection, therefore we feel alone.

How great is the position of a Jew? Why is the consoling of prophets not enough?

In Pirkei Avos, we read, "know before Whom you will have to give a judgment and a reckoning."

Normally you first give a reckoning and that is followed by a judgment. Why is the order here reversed, first the judgment followed by the reckoning?

To understand this let's take a look at another saying in Pirkei Avos, "and payment is exacted from the person, with his knowledge and without his knowledge." The Baal Shem Tov explains that because our Neshama is actually a part of Hashem, the Heavenly Court has no power over a Jewish person. In order to pass judgment on a Jewish person, they put before him, during his lifetime, a scenario of someone committing the same transgression that he committed. When he sees this, he passes judgment, thereby passing judgment on himself. It is with his knowledge, because he is the one who is passing judgment. It is without his knowledge, because he doesn't realize that he is judging himself.

When he comes before the Heavenly Court he has already passed judgment on this scenario, so the judgment comes first. All that is left to do is the reckoning, to show that his case is the same as the scenario, that he himself judged.

What we understand from all this, is that only a Jew can pass judgment on himself. Not an angel nor the Heavenly Court has any power over him. So be careful, "Judge others favorably," as you may be judging yourself.

This is also true in the physical world, no one has power over us. It is we who give power to others over us. As the verse in our Haftora says "those who destroy you and those who lay waste to you, will come out of you."

This is what a Jew is all about, we have the power to change the world, but the world has no power over us. The only power anyone has over us, is what we give them. This is because our Neshamas are a part of Hashem that makes us one with Hashem. In the words of the Baal Shem Tov, "When you are grasping onto a part, you are actually grasping the whole thing." Every one of us is a part of Hashem.

Knowing how special we are, we realize that we deserve more. Although we were in a dark situation and a doubled consoling through prophets pulled us out, now, as we begin to experience our intrinsic bond with Hashem, consoling through prophets, just won't cut it. We want the real thing, Hashem Himself and nothing less. When we don't, we feel alone.

Ultimately we will get what we are asking for, as we see in the last verse of the Haftora, "For Hashem will console Zion..."

May we soon experience Hashem's consoling, with the coming of Moshiach. May he come soon.

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Hashem In Your Home

In this week's parsha, Eikev, we read, "And now Israel, what is Hashem your God asking of you? Only to revere Him, to walk in His ways, to love Him..."

What is Hashem asking of us? How does one revere and love Hashem?

When Hashem created this world, He made his presence hidden. You could know that He is there but you can't see Him. This enables freedom of choice, because if Hashem was visible we would be ashamed to commit a sin. His presence would be so imposing, you would not have a choice.

Being that Hashem can't be seen, it is possible to forget for moments, that He is there.

Hashem wants you to make Him a real part of your life. To develop such a close relationship with Him that His presence feels as if you could see Him.

This takes a strong commitment, getting to know Hashem through the study of his Torah, and getting closer to him through davening. Use words like "Baruch Hashem," blessed is Hashem, "B'ezras Hashem," with Hashem's help, "Im yirtzeh Hashem," if Hashem wants. When making

important decisions, ask: What does Hashem want?

When Hashem is felt in your home, you can't help but follow in His ways. Your choice to make Hashem's presence important in your home is true reverence. The more you develop your relationship with Hashem, the more your life becomes an expression of your love for him.

Baruch Hashem I am blessed with many visitors, people of all levels of Jewish observance. The one thing that is clear is that all believe deeply in Hashem. We all believe. Yet Hashem wants even more, He wants us to feel Him in our day to day lives.

I bless you that when you welcome Shabbos into your home, you truly feel Hashem's presence, and that presence permeates your entire being. Good Shabbos.

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Because We Believe

In this week's parsha, an uncommon word Eikev, is used to say "because." Rashi explains that this refers to seemingly less important mitzvahs, that get trampled under the Eikev (heel). That "because" we will listen and do those mitzvahs, we will be blessed with a whole list of blessings, including miraculous victories over those we fear.

What is the connection between these mitzvahs and miracles?

Thinking of mitzvahs, there are the ones we see as important. We focus our energy on those, while other mitzvahs end up trampled under our heal. Our yetzer hora, evil inclination, convinces us that it makes sense to focus on these, while pushing off the others.

The idea of Eikev is to take a different approach to mitzvahs. To defy our yetzer hora and doing the mitzvahs, because they are Hashem's will. Then all mitzvahs are seen as equal. We do them because we are believers children of believers. It is accepting beyond our minds understanding.

When we take this approach toward Hashem and mitzvahs, going beyond our understanding and doing His will, He in turn goes beyond the natural order to treat us to miracles.

Here is what we could do to help our brothers and sisters all over the world and especially in israel. By taking on those mitzvahs we routinely push off using logical arguments. Doing them only because Hashem wants us to.

Watching the soldiers in Israel, dancing together, more observant and less observant together, singing we are believers the children of believers. It warms my heart, because I know that we are in good hands, Hashem's.