

Ekev - From Past to Future

Thursday, August 22, 2024



Dear Friends,

Last night, I had chills listening to Jon and Rachel Goldberg-Polin speak at the Democratic National Convention with a bi-partisan plea to bring every hostage home. "In a competition of pain," Jon said movingly, "there are no winners." He let the suffering of everyone on both sides of this conflict ignite the room with compassion and gave a charge to do what we can right now to save lives. The two wore the number 320 in masking tape on their shirts and dressed plainly and without the flash that we've come to expect on the presidential stage. They spoke as parents, not as politicians.

As we enter the narrow corridor of time between now and the presidential election, it is all too easy to fall into groupthink and look at the situation in Israel through partisan, rather than humanitarian eyes. Our mercies suddenly have blinders. We see the suffering of some and ignore the suffering of others. Jonathan Haidt argues in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, that "...when a group of people make something sacred, the members of the cult lose the ability to think clearly about it. Morality binds and blinds."

When politics becomes sacred it undermines religious values and can become a religion of its own. In *The Great Partnership*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks wrote, "Politics and Religion do not mix. They are inherently different activities. Religion seeks

salvation, politics seeks power...When religion becomes political or politics becomes religious, the result is disastrous to religion and politics alike."

Before the last election, Yuval Levin wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times* warning us where this thinking may lead: "We tend to look at forms of breakdown in our society in terms of what they produce: anger, cynicism, a rejection of tradition. But we would be wise to also consider what they implicitly demand and yearn for: responsibility, integrity and, above all, solidarity" ("Either Trump or Biden Will Win. But Our Deepest Problems Will Remain," Nov 3, 2020). We have a deep need for transcendence that politics will never satisfy.

Levin offers us some hope as we look in the mirror rather than the Oval Office for relief: "At the heart of our pervasive crisis of alienation are widespread failures of responsibility, deep-seated cultural divisions and a deadly dearth of solidarity. Such challenges can seem impossibly immense when we look at our country from the top down. No president could resolve them, no Congress could address them. But from the bottom up, there are more opportunities to take them on."

Creating a more unified, more loving, more accepting society begins with us - bottom up - and it begins right now.

Shabbat Shalom,

Erica

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Ekev 5784

From Past to Future

Prospection is the ability to think about, imagine, and plan for the future. Depressed people tend to get stuck in past experiences and, as Martin Seligman and Anne Marie Roepke describe in the book *Homo Prospectus*, they also exhibit faulty thinking about the future. Cognitive behavioral therapy and positive psychology interventions target ruminative thinking about the past and amplify optimistic thinking about the future. This week's parsha highlights the positive and negative aspects of prospection.

The opening word of *Parshat Ekev*, for example, is not its namesake, *Ekev*, but *Vehaya* – “And it shall be (*Vehaya*), if (*ekev*) you listen to these laws and are careful to follow them, then the Lord your God will keep the covenant and love with which He made an oath to your fathers” (Deut. 7:12). One midrash explains that the word *vehaya* generally connotes happiness, while the word *vayehi* (and it was) denotes pain and sadness (*Bereishit Rabbah* 42:3).

Rabbi David Tebel, quoted by Rabbi Baruch Simon in his *Imrei Baruch*, provides an astute psychological insight to enlighten this cryptic midrash. The root of the word

vehaya is *haya*, which means “it was.” The letter *vov* at the beginning of the word is known as a *vov ha-hifuch*, which transforms the word from past (“and it was”) to future tense (“it shall be”). In contrast, the root of *vayehi* is *yehi*, which is future tense (“it shall be”), but the opening *vov* changes the word to “and it was.” *Vehaya* reflects the ability to transform the past into the future, and *vayehi* reverts the future back to the past. Rabbi Tebel suggests that happiness stems from the ability to be future-oriented, while remaining stuck in the past leads to misery.

There are two other references in *Parshat Ekev* to the word *vehaya*. Based on the aforementioned midrash, commentaries attempt to frame these verses through the prism of happiness as well. In a puzzling usage, the verse states “And it shall be (*vehaya*), if you ever forget (*im shakhoah tishkhah*) the Lord your God... I testify against you today that you will surely perish” (Deut. 8:19). A literal reading of the verse, a future in which the Israelites potentially forget God, hardly allows for an interpretation of “*vehaya*” as happiness.

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk rereads the verse with quintessential Hasidic creativity. In Hebrew, the word for “forget” is written twice – “*shakhoah tishkhah*.” The Rebbe of Kotzk suggests that the verse can be split into two, leading to an innovative interpretation: “*Vehaya im shakhoah*” – “And if you forget ‘*vehaya*,’” meaning, if you forget to be happy, then you will inevitably “*tishkah et Hashem*,” forget God. Joy is essential to the spiritual quest. It is difficult to serve God properly in a state of dejection.

Yet such happiness needs to be an appropriately religious happiness. The third verse that starts with the word *vehaya* is also the beginning of the second paragraph of the daily *Shema* recitation. “*Vehaya* – And it shall come to pass – *im shamoah tishmeu* – if you surely listen to My commandments which I am commanding you today, to love the Lord your God and to serve Him with all your heart and all your soul” (Deut. 11:13). Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar, in his commentary *Ohr HaChaim*, writes that the *midrashic* happiness embedded in *vehaya* is contingent on the happiness being an outgrowth of “if you surely listen to My commandments.” If the happiness lacks a spiritual luster, it does not qualify as a worthy “*vehaya*.”

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks advocates a positive future-oriented perspective in much of his writing and teaching as a source of well-being: “I believe that the way we write the next chapter in our lives affects all the others that have come before. By action in the future, we can redeem much of the pain of the past” (“The Future of the Past,” *Covenant & Conversation*). Judaism as a whole is “written in future tense” (*Future Tense*). By transforming the past into the future through the process of *vehaya*, we are able to tap into this essential aspect of Jewish faith, enabling us to lead lives imbued with emotional flourishing and spiritual happiness.

Character Challenge: Be mindful when you ruminate about the past. What can you do to move forward and think more positively about your future?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “The future is the sphere of human freedom, because I cannot change yesterday but I can change tomorrow by what I do today. Therefore, because Judaism is a religion of the future it is a religion of human freedom, and because Israel is a future-oriented nation, it remains, in the Middle East, an oasis of freedom in a desert of oppression. Tragically, most of Israel’s enemies are fixated on the past, and as long as they remain so, their people will never find freedom and Israel will never find peace... I believe that we must honour the past but not live in it...” (“Faith in the Future,” *Covenant & Conversation*)

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