



Leadership and the Destination Postcard • Parshat Ekev

In this week's Torah reading, *Ekev*, we are given a beautiful set of images to describe the land of Israel: "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; a land where you may eat food without stint, where you will lack nothing; a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper" (Deut. 8:7-9). It's a compelling picture of the future and one that might have helped the Israelites complete the journey ahead with greater enthusiasm and inspiration. It's also a sharp contrast to the negative images of danger communicated by the leaders who reconnoitered the land as told in Numbers 13.

There, they brought back some of the fruit mentioned again in our verse here: "They reached Wadi Eshcol, and there they cut down a branch with a single cluster of grapes—it had to be borne on a carrying frame by two of them—and some pomegranates and figs" (Num. 13:23). The fruit was not only sweet but of enormous size. When Moses offered his description of the land many chapters later, he clearly spoke the truth as affirmed by those who had already been. Yet the leaders who came back did not speak exclusively of the fruit. They spoke of being literally eaten by enemies instead of being the ones doing the eating: "The country that we traversed and scouted is one that devours its settlers" (Num. 13:32).

Moses amplified his visualization of the land beyond its produce to counter these attacks and to prepare the group for the miracle of normal, domestic life they were soon to experience. He mentioned that the scarcity the Israelites endured in the desert would be reversed when they arrived in Israel. Instead of an arid wilderness that contained no resources, Israel would find iron beneath the surface of the land. On the land would be magnificent trees and vines. And above the land's surface, the hills would yield copper. Water would flow freely in this good country. It is a place "where you will lack nothing," instead of the persistent complaint that the Israelites lacked everything.

Seforno on Deuteronomy 8:9 believes that Moses' descriptive choices were intentionally chosen to augment the good by bringing together many desirable assets in Israel that are generally not found in any one place. Nahmanides adds that Moses' words were used to raise expectations: "...in the place where you expect stones, you will find iron, for it will be mined from the dust thereof. He thus brought them the joyful message that in the Land of Israel there is a quarry of copper and iron which are a great necessity for the inhabitants of the Land..."

The people listening knew they had traveled a long way through different places symbolized by food. They reminisced about the foods of Egypt, but the taste of this food was, by and large, bitter.

They were parched: “The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, ‘If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!’” (Num. 11:4-6). They may have looked back in longing and craved the pungency of garlic, onions, and leeks in their current monochromatic lifestyle, but these left an unpleasant residue, much the way that their suffering as slaves would stay with them as a bad taste they could never remove.

In their wilderness years, in contrast, they had a different food. God was their grocer, supplying them with a special food unknown to them called manna to see if they could stay true to the sacrifices of those years. God was the one “who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your ancestors had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end” (Deut. 8:16). This transitional, mysterious food and its daily delivery stopped when they arrived in the land. It was as transitional as the people who ate it. It represented God’s sustenance through difficult times and Israel’s commitment to reaching the Promised Land.

Now, so close to the finish line of this trek, Moses gave them a new set of foods and a new set of hopes. The land of Israel is a place of sweetness, not bitterness. It is a place where bountiful trees have deep roots, unlike the transitional manna that came and went from day to day. Farming was to be a partnership between God’s grace and human industry. The Israelites would not be dependent only on God for their food. Finally, their mouths would be full with the tastes of freedom, sweetness, rootedness, and independence.

Moses offered the Israelites what leadership experts Dan and Chip Heath call a ‘destination postcard’ in their book *Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard*. When people want or need to change something, they have to have a lot of self-control. This can be exhausting, and the mental fatigue of discipline and impulse

control can become an obstruction to thinking creatively and expansively, diminishing the exact qualities needed to make big changes. We rarely acknowledge just how difficult this shift of mindset and behavior really is: “...when you hear people say that change is hard because people are lazy or resistant, that’s just flat wrong. In fact, the opposite is true: Change is hard because people wear themselves out... What looks like laziness is often exhaustion.”

What provides respite and stimulates people to keep going is what the Heath brothers term a destination postcard — “a vivid picture from the near-term future that shows what could be possible.” Leaders need to understand that words alone are insufficient to stimulate change. People need to visualize what success looks like. Good leaders understand the difficulties; their portraits of the future address the issues and reverse these problems. They paint a granular picture of optimism. But more than any of these motivators, high-impact leaders create the conditions necessary for success. “A good change leader never thinks, ‘Why are these people acting so badly? They must be bad people.’ A change-leader thinks, ‘How can I set up a situation that brings out the good in these people?’”

We conclude with a challenge then and now. Once the Israelites were settled, safe, and productive in their own land, would they remember the tastes of slavery enough to see and address poverty and pain in others still suffering? In his Haggadah, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks reminds us that, “We cannot enjoy the food of affluence while others eat the bread of affliction. We are not fully free if others are oppressed.” As we read this parsha, it’s a good time to think about those who struggle to put food on their tables and consider volunteering at a shelter or donating to a local food pantry. When we have more than enough, it’s time to help those still embittered by the taste of hunger.

What destination postcard do you need right now to inspire change in yourself or others?