

פרשת עקב

OVERVIEW

The people's prosperity, happiness and peace will depend exclusively on their conscientious adherence to the covenant with G-d. That is the primary message of our weekly portion. The memory of the trials in the desert will serve as a lesson to prevent the people from committing careless transgressions for which it would have to pay dearly. Moshe reminds his listeners of his repeated entreaties with G-d to obtain forgiveness for the people's offences. He reminds them of the numerous manifestations of G-d's love for this "stiff-necked" people. He refers to the impact of dramatic events such as the golden calf, Korach's revolt, the tragic episode of the spies. He concludes with a reminder of the Tefillin that are the symbol of our total subordination under the divine will, and of the Mezuzah as the symbol of the Jewish home that is dedicated to the service of G-d. Equipped with these weapons, Israel will withstand all moral and physical onslaughts and head for a bright future full of promise and hope.

COMMENTARY

Introduction

The picture which suggests itself to us at the start of our Sidrah is that of the "heel" (עקב) which also denotes "as a result of", "consequently". The careful and enthusiastic observance of our duties towards G-d will result in G-d's promise and mercy which He has sworn unto our forefathers. In connection with this verse, the commentators stress that the reward from a Mitzva performed should always come at the "heels" of the person, meaning that the reward should not be the goal of the Mitzvah but its almost casual and unexpected "by product". "Do not weigh your obligations by preferring Mitzvot that

seem important to you over those that seem less important, for you do not know the reward for them" (Pirkei Aboth II:1).

Often the totality of the Torah law appears as a bewildering mass of ordinances and commandments with their correlation difficult to discern. Through the challenge of intensive Torah study we endeavor to recognize and interpret the inner meanings of G-d's Word but our efforts must remain fragmentary by definition. Thus our self-discipline and the judgment of a commandment's value and importance must never depend on the results of our scholastic investigations.

We do not know the secrets of the Torah law. We cannot judge how the omission of a commandment affects the fulfillment of another. We do not differentiate between social Mitzvot and those of a purely "religious" nature. We can only reiterate to ourselves that the Torah forms a solid unit whose every ingredient is an integral part of the entire structure.

Loyalty in the Observance of Law

"As a result of your faithfulness in observing all these ordinances and carrying them out with care G-d will maintain His covenant with you and His loving kindness...." (7:12). We simply cannot afford to pay more attention to one segment of the law than to another. The structure of the Torah cannot dispense with a single one of its building blocks – each of which is of equal importance. They are so completely in harmony with one another that if the entire nation observes them faithfully the result will be the greatest happiness that can possibly come to a nation on earth.

Material Existence

".... it is not by bread alone that man can

make a life for himself" (8:3). Bread, the fundamental ingredient of man's nourishment, symbolizes the joint function of man's physical and spritual faculties. Our text alludes to the seeds of a struggle inherent in the search for "the daily bread". There is the undeniable tendency to subordinate all other activities to the exclusive task of "making a living". It requires inner strength and serenity to bring one's talents and spiritual qualities to the fore along with the all-consuming effort of breadwinning. Above all, it requires deep faith in divine assistance nourished by our awareness of G-d's constant Presence in our daily lives to enable us to "sleep peacefully". This is the meaning of this verse as it is the meaning of the forty-year wandering through the desert.

"Land of wheat and barley, land of vines and figs..." (8:8)

This verse which describes the incomparable wealth of the promised land is followed by the duty of the blessing after a meal – the only blessing whose text is specified in the written Torah: "When you eat and are satisfied, then bless G-d, your G-d, for the good land that He has given you" (8:10). Two important features of the land are mentioned: its agricultural products and the abundance of its natural resources. We find here the seven species: wheat, barley, vine and figs, pomegranates, olive and date. (The honey referred to in the text is made of dates). With its rich deposits of iron and copper, the land offered a broad basis for a solid economy as well as for the production of tools and weapons.

A special place is reserved for bread, that most basic of staple food which gives substance and strength to every meal. It is for this reason that the grace after meals (birchat hamazon) is recited only when the meal is accompanied by bread. It is composed of four different berachot, arranged by our sages. In their wisdom, they

turned every aspect of our lives into reminders of our obligations towards G-d.

Companionship at the meal and at Grace

"Competition" is the watchword for men's struggle for bread, the harsh contest in the quest for a secure livelihood. Competition often transforms people into warriors who fight each other for the economic spoils. The Torah teaches the principle of peaceful coexistence in all spheres of life. This is symbolized by the meal taken in the company of congenial friends and members of the family who pay homage to Him Who is the source of all life. Envy and jealousy, so prevalent in the business world, will fade when people break bread together and bless G-d Who gives us our sustenance and to Whom alone we owe our existence.

"Remember" (9:7)

Moshe never ceases to recall for the people their numerous wrongdoings of the past and to admonish them to take the hard-won lessons to heart. Moshe trembles at the thought that the work of education to which he devoted so much patient effort might be jeopardized by Israel legendary stiff-neckedness. He needs assurances of the people's readiness to improve their ways. "Remember, do not forget how you provoked G-d" Only a profound understanding of the meaning of our history will provide us with the spiritual tools to maintain our bond with G-d and His law. For the entire Jewish history is one great monument testifying to our total dependence on divine guidance.

The same words "remember, do not forget" which remind us of our past errors are used by the Torah when it characterizes Amalek as the embodiment of evil. To remember is more than an intellectual and emotional exercise. To remember means action, resulting from a positive or negative experience. To remember is a fundamental

task of Jewish education as a preparation for a meaningful Jewish life. To remember means not only the study our people's history and its Torah law but to become familiar with its never-ending spiritual challenges, its struggles with good and evil, its ascents to greatness and descents to debasements, its eternal optimism and eternal youth - the history of its hopes and aspirations towards a better future.

Fear Of G-d

"All is in the hands of heaven except for the fear of G-d"

This is the interpretation the commentators give to the verse "And now, O Israel, what does G-d, your G-d, require of you? Only to fear G-d, your G-d, to walk in all his ways and to love Him, and to serve G-d, your G-d, with all your heart and all your soul" (10:12). Indeed, only through an act of total freedom is man able to recognize the supremacy of his Master and submit to the will of his Creator. It is one of the axioms of Judaism that G-d imparted to men the free and independent choice of declaring his allegiance to G-d. Here is where the ways of man and animal part. By allowing his life to drift aimlessly and renouncing the divine gift of freedom of choice, man forfeits the chance of finding the only path that leads to the true goal of his existence:

"To serve G-d with all your heart and all your soul" (11:13)

"Serving G-d with all your heart" - comment the sages - this is the prayer. An interpretation that seems obscure in that the concept of service is not at all identical with that of prayer. "Service" requires the presence of a person, an object, an ideal. Prayer centers on the person who prays. Yet she Jewish concept of prayer differs from the usual definition where "prayer" is "request, asking for favors". Thus in Shakespearean language "pray" means

"please", "pray, give me this book...". If Jewish "prayer" meant asking G-d for help, how could our sages arrange for our "Tefilla" to be recited only at certain times of the day, such as restricting the morning prayers to the morning, the afternoon prayers to a limited time, etc. If Tefillah were asking, requesting, we should be allowed to pray whenever we feel the need for asking, and do it in any language. This is known as "bakasaha". - By perusing the Tefilla in our Siddur, we note that with the exception of the "Shemone Essre", most of the prayers do not contain any request for divine help but are hymns and psalms singing the praise of the Almighty and describing our relationship to the divine.

The word "Tefilla" is derived from the verb "pallal" which means "to judge". "Hitpallel", as its reflective form, means "to judge oneself". Thus our Tefillot are designed to judge our relationship to G-d, to ourselves and to our fellowmen. Our sages wisely set aside certain times in the day in the morning before we begin our normal work schedule, in the afternoon in the midst of our work, and in the evening when we relax - to cause us to pause during our activities and reflect on our G-d given tasks as human beings and as Jews (the Hirschian concept of Mensch-Yisrael").

It is in this spirit that "Tefilla" is also called "Avodah". For it provides us with the insight and the determination to live up to the major task and challenge of our lives. : עבדי השם to be לעבדה ולשמרה, true and loyal servants of G-d.

© 1945 Marc Breuer. First publication in the French Language during WWII in Occupied France as "La Tohra Commentée". Based on the teachings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch זצ"ל. New Publication in English by Elie Winsbacher. To receive electronically or to sponsor an issue, Please email: e.w@att.net. Proceeds from sponsorships will be pooled with the intention to publish in book form at the end of the yearly cycle.

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