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Dvar Torah – Parshat Ekev – August 8, 2009

Our lives are filled with **relationships**. We have **relationships** with our **families**, **friends**, **teachers**, **bosses**, **co-workers**, **congregations**, and other **groups**. We have **relationships** on **social networking sites** like facebook and others. We even have **relationships in Math and Science**, many of which are well beyond my level of comprehension.

We recently observed the **3 weeks of mourning** for the Holy Temple and other tragedies in Jewish history, ending with **Tisha B'Av**, a national day of mourning. Our **relationship with G-d was estranged**. During the **7 weeks between Tisha B'Av and Rosh Hashanah**, we **rebuild that relationship** as we prepare for a **new year**. The **Haftorot** that we read for each of these **7 weeks** emphasize that, in spite of our many hardships and losses, **G-d will not forget the Jewish nation**.

Parshat Ekev describes **what will happen if we follow the Torah and what will happen if we do not**. We are reminded of the importance of **helping out those who are less fortunate**. As we reflect on the **destruction** of the **Beit Hamikdash**, we recognize that our Holy Temple was destroyed because of *Sinat Chinam*, **meaningless hatred** and a society where the essential element of **caring about one another was absent**.

In his book The Bedside Torah, **Rabbi Bradley Shavit Artson** notes that in today's times, **directly serving others is often viewed as degrading**. If a young person takes a **job as a waiter or waitress, newspaper carrier or clerical worker** to generate necessary income, people view it as **something honorable**. If that same person is still doing this at the age of **30 or beyond**, he or she may be considered to **lack ambition**. How many **people in high level positions answer their own phones, get their own**

coffee, clean up their own homes or offices, handle their own errands, water their own plants, change their own light bulbs or reach out to get things for others? If someone is eager for **prestige**, he or she should make sure to **have others perform these duties** for them.

Judaism says, however, that it's quite the contrary. It is a **higher level of dignity** and honor to **perform direct service to others** instead of having others always do it for you. **Dignity comes from within** and involves **helping** and **caring about others**. Our forefather **Abraham** demonstrated this when he **directly served a meal to his three visitors**, who turned out to be angels sent by G-d. It was not beneath his dignity to reach out to others.

Rabbi Salomon Gruenwald of Denver points out the sentence in Parshat Ekev relating that **"G-d upholds the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and befriends the stranger, providing him with food and clothing. You too must befriend the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt (Deuteronomy 10:18-19)**. We are given **two reasons** why we need to worry about the welfare of others. We should do this to **emulate G-d**. Also, we should feel for others, because we, **as a nation, know what it means to be oppressed**. We are reminded of the need to **open our hearts** and realize our **interconnectedness to one another**.

We are also told in this week's parsha that **wealth originates with G-d**. A **financially successful person shouldn't think that he or she is wealthy only because of their own efforts**. Authors **Lawrence Bush and Jeffrey Dekro of jewishaction.com** note that our task is to **translate Moses' statement, "the heavens to their uttermost reaches belong to the Lord your G-d, the earth and all that is on it" into humanistic terms**. They point out **Ben Cohen of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream** wrote in a **1992 essay**. "I always felt that we were holding the business in trust for the community. After all, the

community allows you to exist.. they provide the infrastructure: they provide all the **resources** that you use; they provide everything except the idea.” This successful business owner realized that **his prosperity was possible only because the community supported it.** Achieving and maintaining **success** in a business or in any other field comes with a **sense of responsibility to serve others and keep the customers satisfied.**

Rabbi Sroy Levitansky of St. Louis, in his weekly podcast, calls attention to the **rewards that G-d will give** us if we follow the commandments of the Torah. The second paragraph of the **Shema** is contained inside this parsha. In it, we are told that if we follow the Torah, G-d will provide us with **rain for our land and we will eat and be satisfied.** This reward is **not in the classical sense of a reward.** G-d will give us sustenance **so that we will have the energy and the ability to continue to do Mitzvot.** G-d will give us **food, shelter and good health** so that we can **function effectively in reaching out to others and to performing the commandments of the Torah.**

Roberta Fried, of the United Jewish Federation of New York writes about a **grammatical distinction between the first two paragraphs** of the **Shema** prayer. In the **first paragraph,** the word “**You**” is in **singular form** while in the **second paragraph** it’s in **plural form.** Our commentators note that each **person achieves love for G-d in his or her own way,** based on one’s **intellectual and spiritual level.** Yet, our **observance of Mitzvot is enhanced when we perform Mitzvot in a group.** We pray in a synagogue with a **Minyan as part of a community.** Through our **collective efforts,** it has been a reality for so many **people to live in Israel,** and to perform the Mitzvot that one can only do in the Holy Land. The efforts of a **community can go further than one individual person** to make a difference.

This **Shabbat, I take note of two very important relationships.** As you heard my son **Elliot** read Torah and Haftorah today, we recognize his **one year anniversary of**

his Bar Mitzvah. As we **have Shabbatot of comfort,** Elliot's birth in 1995, was a tremendous **source of comfort for my entire family.** He is **named for my late father, Rabbi Alfred Fruchter,** who left this world less than a year before Elliot was born. In many ways, not only in his Hebrew name, **Eliyahu Efrayim,** Elliot reminds me of my late father. He shares his **sense of humor, personality and attitude of caring for others.**

Sadly, we note that the **Levey family is relocating** from Baltimore to Birmingham, Alabama. I can't think of a better **example of a family who truly demonstrates the Mitzvot of Parshat Ekev, reaching out to the community.** Larry, Lisa and all their kids were with us **before, during and after my late husband Craig's illness.** Their **Shabbat table is always filled with people of all walks of life.** They recognize that **everyone is created "Betzelem Elokim"** in the image of G-d, **no matter what their station is in life and what their religious and spiritual levels are.** When I run into Larry, Lisa, Brandon, Josh, Gabby, Adam or Eliana, I always get a **hello or a smile, even if they are in a hurry.** They are **never too busy to acknowledge the presence of others.** I am sure that the **community of Birmingham will be greatly enriched to have the Leveys,** who I am sure will soon have a Shabbat table filled with **new friends they will make and people to whom they will reach out.**

May we learn **from the messages of Parshat Ekev** as we **rebuild our relationship with G-d and with one another** and prepare to usher in the **New Year of 5770.**

Shabbat Shalom.