

## DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

### “Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Ekev  
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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

### Ekev – making a big deal about the little things (and vice versa)

This week’s Parsha of Ekev begins with Moshe telling Bnei Yisrael what their reward will be for keeping the mitzvot.

*“And it will be because (Ekev)<sup>1</sup> you heed these laws and keep them and perform them, then Hashem your G-d will keep the covenant and the kindness that he swore to your forefathers” (Devarim 7:12)*

The word the Torah uses for ‘because’ (i.e. Ekev) is unusual. This word also means ‘heel’, as in the heel of the foot. The commentators discuss this choice of word and the lessons we can learn.

Rashi points out that ‘heel’ alludes to the ‘minor’ mitzvot, those that people presume are unimportant and figuratively trample on with their heels. Rashi teaches that one implication of the reference to ‘heel’ is that if we are careful even with these minor mitzvot, then we can be assured that Hashem will reward us. The Ramban interprets ‘Ekev’ as ‘the end’ (since the heel is at the end of the body). He interprets this as implying that the reward is the end result of keeping the mitzvot. Rabbeinu Bechaya interprets this allusion to ‘heel’ as being a hint that the reward we receive in this world is only a minor aspect (i.e. the ‘heel’) of the reward that we will ultimately receive for the mitzvot that we perform. The Baal HaTurim interprets this word as suggesting that we should perform the mitzvot and behave in a humble manner, like the lowly heel.

Many Rabbanim have proclaimed in recent times that we are currently living in the first phase of the End of Days, known as the ‘Ikveta d’Mashicha’.<sup>2</sup> This phrase literally means the heels of Mashiach. This is the generation in which we can start to hear the footsteps of the Mashiach. It is also the generation which is the furthest away from the giving of the Torah and therefore we are at the lowest level spiritually (just like the heel is the furthest point from the head).

The word Ekev is thus very relevant to our generation. We are the lowly generation of the heel and we will return to Hashem after the long exile and receive the reward that was promised. There are a number of similarities between our generation and the heel. Firstly, just like the heel is farthest from the head, our generation can be very far from common sense and our priorities are often totally back-to-front.

This relates to another characteristic - the heel is the least sensitive part of the body. The skin on the base of the foot becomes very hard over the years. We can see this clearly with Abebe Bekila, a double Olympic marathon gold-medallist from Ethiopia. He was most famous for winning the marathon gold medal in the 1960 Rome Olympics while running barefoot. He had trained barefoot with other Ethiopian runners on tough rocky soil.<sup>3</sup> He was able to win an Olympic

<sup>1</sup> Some of the commentators translate ‘Ekev’ as ‘reward’ rather than ‘because’ (e.g. Onkelos, R’ Saadyah Gaon).

<sup>2</sup> For example, ‘Ikveta d’Mashicha’ by Rav Elchanan Wasserman; “Shem Olam” by the Chofetz Chaim.

<sup>3</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abebe\\_Bekila](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abebe_Bekila)

marathon in record time over the cobbled Roman streets without footwear because he was used to running barefoot on hard, rocky ground.

Ironically, on the other hand, the bottom of the foot can also be very ticklish. The brush of a feather can cause a person to break out into uncontrollable laughter. Such illogical extremes may reflect our generation – the generation of the heel.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand we are often extremely insensitive to the terrible tragedy that happens all around us. On the other hand, we can become extremely affected and annoyed by the ‘small stuff’ and we can become excited and enthralled over superficial nothingness, as minor as the tickle of a feather.

For example, many of us struggle to summon up emotion and tears when pondering the fact that the Bet Hamikdash has still not been rebuilt. This should cause us immeasurable pain. On Tisha B’Av we have to work very hard just to create a semblance of a feeling of loss. In contrast, consider how upset we become when our daily plans are jeopardised or our football team loses! And consider how much attention and effort we devote to pursuits that are totally unimportant in the overall scheme of things.

This back-to-front thinking also affects our interpersonal relationships. When it comes to something that affects us personally, we often react like the heel being tickled with a feather. Something that is really not so important causes a very strong reaction. On the other hand, we often struggle to empathise with the suffering of others, acting instead like the toughened heel of the African athlete!

It may be difficult to feel more for someone else’s tragedy than our own relatively minor inconveniences. But at least we can try to increase our concern for the pain of others. Consider the following scenario:

*Reuven came home from work in a great mood. He was planning to meet some old school friends that night. He was looking forward to a good meal, catching up on old times and sharing a few beers. But then tragedy struck! Two of his friends had unexpected work commitments and they had to postpone the gathering until next week. Reuven was furious. He was looking forward to this evening all week and he had left work early especially. For the rest of the night he was in a grumpy mood. The next afternoon Reuven’s daughter was very disappointed to find out that her dance lesson was cancelled for that week. However Reuven did not have the time or patience for her. He was too caught up in his own issues. “It’s only a silly dance class” he said. “In any case they will have another class next week!”*

Let’s turn on our heel and turn our priorities around! To do this we can start by contemplating our reactions and recognising when they are inappropriate. Then we can try to devote more attention and energy to the pain of others. We should strive to reach a level whereby we react more strongly when another Jew steps on a jagged rock than when we are tickled by a feather.

Let’s try something this week

1. Try to be aware of how much focus we give to the pain of others in contrast to how much energy we devote to insignificant matters that affect us personally.
2. Try to minimise our reactions to the ‘small stuff’ and contemplate the plight of other Jews.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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<sup>4</sup> This idea was heard from a number of sources, including Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair of Yeshivat Ohr Somayach.