

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

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

Ekev – Increasing our emunah through the manna

In this week's Parsha of Ekev, Moshe continues to share with Bnei Yisrael some of Judaism's fundamental principles. He discusses Bnei Yisrael's diet in the desert during their 40 years of wandering, specifically the Heavenly manna which fell from the sky each day.

He afflicted you and let you get hungry and then he fed you the manna that you did not recognise and nor did your forefathers recognise in order to make known to you that not by bread alone does man live, but rather by everything that comes from Hashem's mouth does man live. (Devarim 8:3).

The phrase “Man does not live by bread alone” is often misinterpreted or quoted out of context. People think that it means “variety is the spice of life”. We need more than just plain bread. We also need cakes and treats and delicious alternatives. But of course, that is not the intention of the verse at all. The rest of the verse goes on to talk about spiritual matters, not different flavours of ice cream! “...by everything that comes from Hashem's mouth does man live”.

Incidentally, another passuk that is often quoted out of context is “Let My people go”. This is a wonderful catchphrase for freedom. But people tend to forget the second half of the phrase: “Let My people go... so that they may serve me!”¹

Why did Hashem feed Bnei Yisrael manna in the desert for 40 years? The Arizal explains the pasuk quoted above (Devarim 8:3) to mean that the body receives its vitality from physical things, but the soul receives its vitality from faith. Through the manna, Hashem was giving Bnei Yisrael a 40 year lesson in emunah. Every morning, Bnei Yisrael would collect enough manna to last them for the day. Every night, they went to sleep with absolutely nothing left over. If they tried to keep over some of the manna for the next day, it would become rotten. Try to imagine going to sleep at night not knowing where you would get food for your breakfast the next morning or money to buy that food! We probably wouldn't sleep very well that night.

We may know in our heads that Hashem provides us with our needs. Of course, we certainly have to put in the personal effort, but the outcome of our efforts is always up to Hashem. However, especially after we have put in the effort with our own hands, it is difficult to feel this level of trust in our hearts and to just let go and leave it up to Hashem. Hashem gave Bnei Yisrael all of 40 years of daily training to fully learn and internalise this lesson.

One of the reasons that our personal relationships suffer is because we are too focused on earning our livelihood. Many of us spend far too much time at work. But even when we are at home, spending time with our family and friends, we are often still taking care of work related matters or responding to emails. And even if we manage to turn off our phones we are often thinking and worrying about work. This distracts us and detracts from our interactions with others.

¹ See for example Shemot 7:16

If we are able to improve our emunah we will be able to free ourselves from focusing on our own worries and focus more on other people.

The following story is told about the Vilna Gaon. He was collecting money for an important cause, and he was visiting a number of houses together with some attendants. They came to the house of a very wealthy person who could hopefully give them enough money to meet their needs. The Vilna Gaon walked up to the door and knocked once. He then turned and started to walk away. The attendants were surprised. "Why are you leaving so quickly?" they asked. "Shouldn't we wait a bit longer and try harder to see if someone is at home? Perhaps we should knock a few more times, a little more loudly." But the Vilna Gaon didn't need to stay. He explained that he had already made enough of an effort. "If Hashem wanted us to get money from this house my first knock would have been answered. There is no need to knock again."

The Vilna Gaon obviously had a very high level of emunah. How can we work on increasing our emunah so that we can go to sleep each night confident that Hashem will provide exactly what we need the next day? How can we be less focused on our own problems and more present during our family time?

Obviously we are not nowadays blessed with the opportunity to be directly trained in emunah by Hashem through the manna. However, many people have the custom of reading the chapter of the Torah that describes the manna each morning after Shacharit². That way they hope to internalise the crucial message of emunah that we learn from the manna before they start their day. The Levush explains that this chapter teaches that Hashem provides each day's sustenance, just as he provided the manna each day in the desert.³ Even though this portion is quite long, it would be well worth setting aside some time to read it in English.

Another method for increasing emunah is to focus on the many kindnesses that Hashem gave us in the past. Hashem has taken care of us our whole life. Though we were all born as helpless, naked infants, He has always given us enough food to sustain us, clothes to wear and a roof over our heads. If Hashem has taken care of our needs for our whole lives until now, then why should this change in the future? The more that we meditate on this idea, the calmer we will start to feel about our livelihood and our needs.

Improving our emunah is a lifelong process. But the rewards can be amazing. Imagine spending time with our family and friends and being truly mindful and focused without worry. Imagine the reduction in stress and the feelings of peace which will emanate from truly believing that all of our needs were met, are being met right now, and will continue to be met in the future.

Let's try something this week:

1. Read through the chapter of the manna at least once. Try to set aside time to read through it regularly.
2. Spend some time thinking, speaking or writing about how Hashem has taken care of all of our needs for our whole life until this very day. List them, including as much detail as possible.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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² Page 181c in the standard Artscroll Ashkenaz siddur.

³ Taken from the Artscroll introduction to the Chapter of Manna.