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Ekev: Getting ready

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Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk famously taught, “One who is about to pray should learn from a common laborer, who sometimes takes a whole day to prepare for a job. A wood-cutter, who spends most of the day sharpening the saw and only the last hour cutting the wood, has earned his day’s wage.” From the first day of Elul, when we begin blowing shofar, through the last, dramatic shofar blast on Yom Kippur is forty days. Over 50 days are devoted to preparing for or celebrating the High Holidays, including Sukkot. The Jewish calendar dedicates 15% of the year to assessing and improving how we spend the other 85%. Good planning is good for the soul.

But the planning actually begins earlier, in Av, the month preceding Elul. Tisha B’av, which commemorates the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, calls our attention to the need for repentance and renewal. The Torah and Haftarah readings leading up to Elul suggest diverse strategies for finding our way back to God and our true selves.

This week’s Torah portion, Ekev, includes famous and profound instructions for how to live in a way that honors God’s will for our lives. “Beware lest your heart grow haughty and you say to yourselves, ‘My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.’” (Deuteronomy 8:17). Cultivate humility (9:5). Be grateful (8:10). Stay open to correction (8:5).

“And now, O Israel, what does Adonai your God demand of you? Only this: to revere Adonai your God, to walk [only] in God’s paths, and to love God and serve Adonai with all your heart and with all your soul; to keep Adonai’s commandments ... for your good.” (10:12-13). The task is daunting, but Torah and repentance are given for our benefit, to help us improve both our behavior and our circumstances.

It is a fitting preparation for the High Holidays that Ekev asks us to become softer, more vulnerable, and more flexible. If we are to repent and forgive, those qualities are essential. “Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts, and stiffen your necks no more” (10:16).

The opening chapter includes blessings that were incorporated into the High Priest’s prayer for the community in the New Year — a direct connection with the holidays (7:12-15). The rest of the chapter focuses on a seemingly unrelated and difficult topic: the utter destruction of foreign idolaters. Yet these verses, too, can prepare us for days of reflection and Days of Awe. We all need to uproot destructive influences. Moreover, the details of what is said about foreign idolaters constitute a primer on successful repentance.

“It is a snare to you” (7:16). Don’t assume that you are above being tempted; avoid temptation. “You need have no fear of them” (7:18). Don’t succumb to bad influences out of fear of losing popularity or power. Don’t despair or scare yourself, either (7:21).

“God will dislodge those peoples before you little by little” (7:22). It takes time to form bad habits and devolve spiritually; renewal is usually a gradual process, too. “You will not be able to put an end to [idolators] at once, lest wild beasts multiply against you.” (7:22) Even if we could suddenly rid ourselves of every bad influence and habit, the gambit wouldn’t work. We need to populate each newly-claimed arena in our lives with positive habits — and that takes time. If we leave a vacuum, wild thoughts and impulses will arise and rout us, as surely as wild animals will overrun unprotected territory.

To “obliterate [the idolators’] name from under the heavens” (7:24) is to destroy their identity and legacy. This, too, is a hint about how to repent. If you want to put an end to a sin, stop discussing it and mentally reviewing it. Once you have completed the steps and strategies of repentance found in Ekev and elsewhere, resist telling the story of your sin. Let it starve for attention and die out.

Ekev reminds us that God gives second chances. After the Israelites worshipped a Golden Calf and Moses consequently destroyed the first set of tablets, God said, “carve for yourself two stone tablets like the first” (10:1). Like our ancestors, we have invited idolatry into our midst. God tells us, “turn a new page in the Book of Life.” Repentance is possible — ekev tishmeun, if only we will listen to the lessons of Parashat Ekev.