

# Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

## Parashat Ekev

### How Can We Transform our Pitfall of Pride Into Prayer?

#### **In the Good Old Days Having Less Made People Appreciate More**

In the olden days when specialties were scarce, people appreciated the little things so much more. I recall reading a novel about life in the Shtetel in East Europe. There was a poor family with many children and one day they got a specialty item for all the kids to share. It was one orange! It really touched me how much excitement just one orange segment elicited in each family member. When I worked on translating my father's memoirs into English, I was also amazed at how few commodities and toys children grew up with when he was a boy. This was not in a Shtetel, it was rather in the Western World less than a hundred years ago. Here is one of my father's testimonies – taking place in the late nineteen thirties and early forties. You can learn from it how having less made the kids appreciate more and become more inventive:

“There were a lot of innovative games that could interest both boys and girls. For example, puzzles and rebuses, building kits and paper dolls with various outfits, and much more. I still remember a brainteaser. Out of eight matches you had to form two squares and four triangles... “Some boys were technically inventive and built ‘crystal devices.’ These were primitive listening devices, which we boys had great pleasure in. Occasionally, we also wanted to play football. This took place on ‘The Meadow,’ about a 15-minute walk from our home, where some of us also had a school garden. It was a magnificent open space with large green areas, and playgrounds, though mainly designated for the younger children... The girls played with marbles, swapped glossy pictures, skipped and played hopscotch and of course, they also played with dolls. When we played with the girls it was mostly hide and seek. There were plenty of hiding places, and this game often lasted many hours. Where I live now in Holte, (a suburb of Copenhagen) there are roughly 500 apartments with playgrounds for the little ones in several places, but children are rarely seen there. One hardly ever sees older children playing together the way we did when I was a child. A change must have occurred in the children's recreational patterns” (Dr. Salomon Vainer, My Memoir: The Story of a Danish Jew who Fled the Nazis p 52-54).

My father also described the life of his mother who came from a poor Russian family. She was only 11 years old when she arrived in Denmark. She did not attend school and was given no education. Yet she had worked in a matzo bakery as a bakery assistant in Russia. Her first meager wage was ‘invested’ in purchasing a silver cup. Her grandmother wanted her to buy something that would last. The cup is still in the family's possession. It is a very beautiful cup, quite valuable today (ibid. p 31). My father's testimonies show how the children worked hard from a young age and valued their meager possessions which they used in innovative ways, this is such a far call from the overflow of stuff average kids have today, which they hardly play with as they spend most of their time glued to their phones, with little time left for creativity and play.

#### **Is it ‘My power, the Strength of my Own Hand That Brought Me This Great Wealth’?**

The Torah foretold the times of material overflow we are living through today, with one of our main problems being how to get rid of all the extra clutter. Since the industrial revolution, we have learned so many clever ways of productivity, which tempt us to forget that Hashem is the only One who gives

us the strength to succeed in anything we accomplish.

ספר דברים פרק ח פסוק י' ואכלת ושבעת וברכת את השם אלהיך על הארץ הטבה אשר נתן לך: (יא) השמר לך פן תשכח את השם אלהיך... (יב) פן תאכל ושבעת ובתים טובים תבנה וישבת: (יג) ובקרך וצאנך ורבין וכסף וזהב ירבה לך וכל אשר לך ירבה: (יד) ורם לבבך ושכחת את השם אלהיך המוציאך מארץ מצרים מבית עבדים... (יז) ואמרת בלבבך כחי ועצם ידי עשה לי את החיל הזה: (יח) וזכרת את השם אלהיך כי הוא הנותן לך כח לעשות חיל למען הקים את בריתו אשר נשבע לאבותיך כיום הזה: "When you eat and are satisfied, you shall bless Hashem, your G-d, for the good land He has given you. Beware that you do not forget Hashem, your G-d...lest you eat and be sated, and build fine houses and live in them, when your herds and your flocks grow abundant, and your silver and gold multiply, and all that you have increases, your heart might become haughty, forgetting Hashem, your G-d, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, of the house of slavery... You might be tempted to tell yourself, 'My power, the strength of my own hand, has brought me this great wealth.' But you must remember Hashem your G-d, for He is the One who empowers you to do great things, upholding the covenant that He swore to your ancestors... (*Devarim* 8:10-11, 13-18).

### **The Only Way to Victory in War for Israel is Enlisting the Help of the Almighty**

Since Israel ranks among the ten most powerful countries in the annual list; and the fourth strongest military in the world (Roundup for 2022 published by US News & World Report), it is tempting to think that our victories are due to our sophisticated war techniques. Ralbag explains that the Almighty was concerned that it would seem to Israel that their own power enabled them to win their wars. To remove this false notion from their hearts, Israel must perpetually recall in our hearts how Hashem took us out of Egypt when Israel was weak without any war experience, yet nevertheless, we won. This could only be because Hashem helps us. The Exodus thus teaches us that it is not through our own military power but only due to the help of heaven that Israel wins the wars. During the current prolonged war, although Israel has gained victories in Gaza, things are intensified to the degree that even the fiercest, most confident general must realize that we need to turn to Hashem for help in order to overcome all of the enemies that surround us, all of whom have one unified agenda to "wipe Israel off the map." These enemies include Iran, and its Shi'ite theocracy in the East, Syria, and Lebanon with its Hezbollah in the North, Gaza and its Hamas in the South, and the European Union in the West. It is no secret that the main objective of all Arab terror organizations – Fatah, Hamas, and Hezbollah – is the annihilation of Israel. The growing instability in Egypt, Syria, and Jordan, the looming threat from Iran's nuclear weapons program, the Hamas/Fatah reconciliation, and the increased pressure from the U.N. and the E.U have created the greatest threat to Israel's continued existence we have faced since the Yom Kippur War of 1973. *Jonathan Bernis, Identifying Israel's Enemies*. As all nations turn against our tiny nation it is now more than ever becoming clear to even the staunchest unbeliever that the only way to victory is to turn to Hashem with all our hearts and souls.

### **Bound to Turn to Hashem When Being Between a Rock and a Hard Place**

Hashem is squishing us hard these days so that we will understand how our ability to be successful is totally dependent on G-d, as it states in Song of Songs:

ספר שיר השירים פרק ב פסוק יד יונתי בחגי הסלע בסתר המדרגה הראיני את מראיך השמיעיני את קולך...

“My dove in the crevice of the cliff, in the secret step, show me your countenance and let Me hear your voice...” (*Song of Songs* 2:14).

According to Rashi, this verse alludes to when Israel was squished between a rock and a hard place during the Exodus. While the Egyptians approached them from behind ready to attack, the Reed Sea loomed before them threatening to drown them all. According to nature, there would have been no way for them to get out of this situation alive. Only by turning to Hashem in prayer could they be saved, that’s the meaning of “let me hear your voice...”. Hashem brings us to these places of no way out, to squeeze our souls into the deepest prayer. I hope it won’t take too much more squeezing before our hearts become sufficiently resuscitated to truly pray! Katav Sofer explains that in the desert Israel didn’t need any weapons as it states, “Hashem will battle for you, and you hold your peace! (*Shemot* 14:14). Yet after making the Golden Calf, the Israelites’ emunah took a gradual downward dip, spiraling into deterioration. First they became arrogant, forgot about Hashem, and then they imagined that it was their own strength that caused their success. Had they kept their steadfast emunah of “...we will do and we will hear” (*Shemot* 24:7), they would not have needed either spear or sword for Hashem would have conquered the Land of Israel for them. Now, after they had lost their prior level of trust in Hashem, they needed weapons of war. Although they no longer deserved it, Hashem empowered them to conquer the land, “for the sake of upholding the covenant that He swore to their ancestors...” (*Devarim* 8:18). This is why the Almighty had to remind Israel, “But you must remember Hashem your G-d, for He is the One who empowers you to do great things...” (Ibid.) Although at the conquest of the Land of Canaan, Hashem was no longer battling their wars by Himself like in Egypt, the Israelites still had to understand and remember that as they employed their best war strategies, it was still Hashem who empowered them to be victorious (Ketav Sofer, *Devarim* 8:17). This message from Parashat Ekev applies more than ever to Israel’s current war. When we truly understand and remember that just as Hashem helped us overcome our enemies during Yehoshua’s time, so will He continue to empower us with complete victory from our current war. All we need to do is to turn to G-d in prayer!

### Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Ekev –

#### Some Tips for Preventing Arrogance and Forgetting About Hashem

Arrogance is one of the worst character traits that turns away the Divine Presence. Therefore, our sages directed: “Hold yourself very, very lowly” (*Pirkei Avot*, Chapter 4, Mishna 4). They also declared that whoever allows his heart to be arrogant, has denied the basic principle of the Torah, as it states, “Your heart be haughty, and you will forget Hashem your G-d” (*Devarim* 8:14). Furthermore, they said, “Whoever is arrogant should be placed under a ban of ostracism. This applies even if he is only somewhat arrogant;” (Rambam, *Hilchot Deot*, Chapter 2, Halacha 3). Whoever passes (מְפִיק/ *me'fik*) a shield over himself at a time of arrogance, (whoever suppresses his yetzer hara as though it were covered with a shield when he is arrogant, troubles will be closed and sealed from him, as it is stated: “The channels (אֲפִיקַי/ *afikei*) of his strong shields of pride are closed with a narrow seal. (*Iyuv* 41:7); (*Babylonian Talmud*, *Iruvin* 65a). This implies that by subduing our yetzer hara at a time of arrogance our troubles will be closed and sealed before us. There is a fine line between confidence and arrogance. Being confident isn’t the problem, the problem arises when confidence turns into self-sufficient arrogance, which makes us forget the Almighty without Whom we would be completely helpless. When we are confident that Hashem is on our side, we can be secure enough that we won’t need to go out of our way to show how amazing we are.

- **Remember Where You Came from and Where You are Going** – We are all mortal beings totally dependent on Hashem’s blessing to accomplish anything in life. When you feel pride creeping into your heart, recall how we all came from a putrid drop of semen, and how our end is that our flesh will be consumed by worms. Meditating on our short-lived time in this world, and how the body eventually decomposes will remind us that Hashem imbued us with life so that we serve Him. Only by recalling our Divine purpose in the world will our souls gain eternal life.
- **Attribute All Your Successes to Hashem** – When you worked really hard on something and applied all your abilities to finally succeed, there is a great temptation to feel that “it was my own hand, that brought me this great accomplishment.” When that happens, it is important to turn inward and recall that every one of your own doings would be naught if it wasn’t for Hashem, Who imbues you with your talents and abilities to work hard.
- **When Someone Compliment You for Your Great Abilities and Successes** – remind yourself that Hashem is using you as his messenger. My spiritual healing teacher taught me to recite (ספר תהילים פרק צג פסוק א) הַשֵּׁם מֶלֶךְ גָּאוֹת לְבִשׁ לְבִשׁ /Hashem Malach Ge’ut Lavesh – “Hashem is King He is robed in grandeur” (*Tehillim* 93:1). Always testifying that all our achievements emanate from Hashem’s greatness.
- **Pray to Hashem for Continued Success and War Victory** – Remembering how Hashem took us out of Egypt is one of The Six Remembrances that we must remind ourselves of daily. This is to imbue us with the strong emunah that just as we were weak and helpless then, but Hashem saved us from all our enemies, so will Hashem continue to save us even now whether we are physically strong or weak!
- **We are Used to Thanking Hashem for Everything He Does for Us** – I suggest, to also thank Him for everything we do. Whenever you feel pride in yourself – you may want to thank Hashem in the following way: “Thank You Hashem for everything I do!” Affirming in this way that all our successes are Hashem’s working through us.