

Ekev: The Eternal is Not Afraid of a Long Journey? Yaara Wiedman Samuel, Class of 2025

Parshat Ekev begins with profound ideas that have accompanied Judaism for many years: the concepts of reward and punishment, as well as divine providence.

And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant made on oath with your father: [God] will favor you and bless you and multiply you—blessing your issue from the womb and your produce from the soil, your new grain and wine and oil, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock, in the land sworn to your fathers to be assigned to you. (Deut. 7:12-13)

The verses promise that whoever does the will and word of God will be rewarded with God's love and support. Anyone who went through the events of October 7 cannot read these verses with ease. Were **all those murdered** and taken hostage (and still somewhere in the tunnels of Gaza) being punished for sin or (God forbid!) a punishment for the victim's own sins? Is all the pain, loss, and sorrow because of their sins and pride, "beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage... like the nations that God will cause to perish before you, so shall you perish—because you did not heed your God" (Deut. 8:14)?

Rabbi Kalonymus Kalman Shapiro, the Rebbe of Piaseczno (and the Warsaw Ghetto), addresses this question in his book *Esh Kodesh* (Sacred Fire). In a sermon for the portion of Mattot, July 11, 1942, he writes:

There is suffering we endure individually for our sins, or pangs of love that soften and purify us. In all of this, God merely suffers with us. But then there is suffering in which we merely suffer with Him, so to speak—suffering for the sanctification of God's name. In the liturgy for fast day and High Holy days, we say, "Our Father, our King, act for the sake of those who were murdered for Your Holy Name." They are murdered, as it were, for Him, and for the sanctification of His blessed name. [...] The chief suffering is really for God's sake, and

because of Him we are ennobled and exalted by this sort of pain. With this, we may encourage ourselves, at least a little....

According to the *Esh Kodesh*, not all suffering that comes upon us is a clear punishment for our actions. There are also sufferings of love whose purpose is to purify a person. And then there are also “troubles for the sanctification of God's name,” suffering, and pain in the name of righteousness, faith or inner spirit. Similarly, the Ben Ish Chai (Chacham Yosef Chaim of Baghdad) comments on the following verse from our *parsha*:

Remember the long way that your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, in order to test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep the divine commandments or not. (Deut. 8:2)

He writes:

This suffering is to test you, to know what is in your heart, whether you will keep the *mitzvot* or not...The test is in the length of the journey, will you get sick of it or not.

The long journey, during which there is also suffering and pain, is a test for the soul, to see if a person continues to hold on to their faith. The eternal nation does not fear the long road because they know that the journey is meant to be both long and painful, and that our main goal is never to despair. We know that in the past, as in the future, there are difficult and painful moments, there is fear and terror, just as there is also hope. We know this is part of the path through which God leads us, and our responsibility as a people is to preserve the hope, the Torah, and the strong spirit.

According to the Ben Ish Chai, the only way to safely go through the journey is through love and closeness to one another:

Let us understand, with God's help, that the observance of Torah and mitzvot depends on the love and unity that the children of Israel have with one another. It is known that the Ten Commandments are [comprised of] 172 (קע"ב) words--like the amount in עֶקֶב [ekev, our *parsha*]. The last word is "לרעיך" "to your neighbor" [see Exodus 20:14].

The meaning of this word relates to love and friendship (ריעות), [suggesting that] if these [bonds] are found between you as you listen to these laws, then you will certainly achieve [true] observance and fulfillment.

Suffering, pain, and loss come to the individual and to society as a whole. The only way to survive all this pain is to understand the meaning of our existence here, to see the spirit, to give it space. Though different in our opinions and in our places, only together can we preserve the shared story, the one Torah, and the belief in the righteousness of our path. Only together can we endure the sufferings of the journey, especially when we do not understand them.

Ya'ara Wiedman Samuel holds a Bachelors from Tel Aviv University Jewish history and Jewish philosophy and a Masters from Tel Aviv University in the Jewish history. She is a Ramit at Midreshet Ein Hanatziv and teaches Talmud and Jewish thought as well as working as a group facilitator. She lives in Ein Hanatziv with her husband and three children.