

מי כעמך ישראל

PARASHAT EIKEV

Don't Forget the Joy

Welcome to Mi Ke'amcha Yisrael. In this week's parasha, Parashat Eikev, the Torah gives us a frightening warning:

וְהָיָה אִם שָׁכַחְתָּ תְּשַׁכַּח אֶת ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ

"And it will be, if you forget Hashem your God."

There is something very strange about the wording of this pasuk. Whenever the Torah uses the word וְהָיָה, it introduces something joyful. So the Raglayim l'Davar asks an obvious question: how can the Torah begin one of its most frightening warnings with the very word that signals happiness?

He offers a remarkable answer. Perhaps we have been reading this pasuk incorrectly. The Torah is not merely warning a person not to forget Avodat Hashem. It is warning him: don't forget the simcha. Don't lose the joy that is supposed to accompany our Avodat Hashem. Because a person can go on doing everything. He can keep Shabbat, put on tefillin, daven three times a day, learn Gemara, and perform every mitzvah he is supposed to perform. But slowly, over time, the joy disappears. And if serving Hashem becomes nothing more than routine — something we check off, so to speak — then, as the Vilna Gaon teaches, that can be the beginning of something far more dangerous. First a person forgets the simcha. And eventually, chas v'shalom, he can come to forget much more.



I'd like to share a fabulous story told over by Rav Yisroel Brog that shows just how powerful that simcha can be.

A not-particularly-observant man in Eretz Yisrael once heard in a class on the mitzvot that one should recite the whole Shabbat Kiddush in honor of the holy Shabbat. So he decided to try. Thursday, in the store, he lifted his purchase and recited Kiddush over it. A few heads turned. He felt self-conscious, but

he pushed through. Then came Friday, Erev Shabbat, in the crowded fish store. He did it again — louder, with full sincerity, the whole Shabbat Kiddush. His voice carried across the store. Heads turned; customers stared. He had meant every word, wanting only to honor Shabbat. But standing there beneath the puzzled looks of strangers, he suddenly felt terribly self-conscious. He paid quickly and hurried out, mortified.

On Sunday he went to a class given by a different Rav. The topic was performing mitzvot with yirat shamayim — and that a mitzvah should never become a disturbance to the place one is standing in. To illustrate the point, the Rav offered an example: “Just this past week, a man in a fish store called out Kiddush at the top of his voice. His intention may have been sincere, but that is not the proper way to perform a mitzvah.”

The man froze. There was no question whom the Rav was describing. He was the example. He sat through the rest of the class humiliated. All he had wanted was to do something nice for Hashem — and now his mitzvah had become the illustration in a shiur of what not to do.

When he got home, he told his wife: “I don’t only want to do mitzvot, I want to do them properly. And apparently even that I didn’t do properly.” She suggested a walk, and on their way out they passed a fish restaurant. So they went in. He mentioned to her that he had brought his wallet but had only 20 shekel in it. “It’s enough, it’s enough,” she said. “Let’s sit.” As they walked in, the owner glanced over, and for a moment he stared at the couple. The man noticed, but thought nothing of it. They sat down and ordered a small portion with the 20 shekel he had on him.

In no time at all, the owner walked over carrying an overflowing tray of delicacies. “You must have made a mistake,” the man said. “I told the waiter I only have 20 shekel.” “There’s no mistake,” the owner said. “It’s on me. Eat first, and I’ll explain afterward.”

The owner sat down beside them and shared the following:

“As a child I grew up religious — I was frum. Then this restaurant took over my life. It wasn’t something that happened overnight. There was no morning when I woke up and decided, ‘I’m not keeping Shabbat anymore.’ It happened gradually — one compromise, then another. One Shabbat off, and then another. Until one day I looked at my wife and said, ‘It’s gone.’ She had been begging me to come back. I told her, ‘If Hashem really cares and wants me back, let Him send me a sign.’

“Last Friday, in the fish store, I heard a voice call out the whole Kiddush. I turned around. It was you — standing in the middle of the store, holding a huge fresh fish. Everyone around you was staring. Some of them didn’t understand you. Some probably thought you looked foolish. But I

didn't. Because they hadn't been asking for a sign. I had. And the moment I saw you, I knew exactly what I was looking at. I went home that Friday and kept Shabbat for the first time in a very long time. You think I gave you a tray of fish? You gave me back my Shabbat. You gave me back my Shabbat."

Those two men became the best of friends. They davened together and learned together, from that day on, for many, many years.

One simple man walked into a fish store thinking he was buying dinner. A few feet away stood another Jew who had asked our Creator for exactly one sign — and who was about to receive it.



Ladies and gentlemen, maybe now we understand what frightened the Vilna Gaon. We usually think a Jew walks away the day he stops keeping Shabbat. The Vilna Gaon tells us it begins much earlier — the day Shabbat stops making him happy. That is what made this moment in the fish store so extraordinary. One Jew had forgotten Shabbat, and Hashem sent him another Jew who couldn't contain his excitement for it. He thought he was holding up a fish. What that restaurant owner saw was a Jew holding up his Judaism with pride.

וְהָיָה אִם שָׁכַח תִּשְׁכַּח

When the simcha disappears, a Jew can eventually forget. But that Friday afternoon showed that the opposite is also true: sometimes one Jew's simcha makes another Jew remember. Our children are watching. Our grandchildren are watching. The people around us are watching. And perhaps the greatest inheritance we can leave them is not a Judaism they know how to keep, but a Judaism they saw us take joy in.

Never forget the simcha.

Mi ke'amcha Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom u'Mevorach.