

PARASHAT EIKEV

“And you shall eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord your God for the good land which he has given you.” (Eikev: chapter 8, verse 10) Our Rabbis have interpreted this statement as a command, and through these words it is incumbent on each person to recite Birkat Hamazon or Grace After Meals. Whilst we are commanded to remember God in the minutiae of life, including remembering him when we eat, it is easy to forget one’s humble beginnings when prosperity and affluence (not effluence for the Kath and Kim fans) creeps in. The challenge is thus not poverty but affluence, not slavery but freedom, not homelessness but home.

Judaism did not invent the wheel and we have drawn on the teachings of other civilisations. Hamurabi taught that the great gods instructed him to make justice prevail in the land, to abolish the wicked and the evil, and to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak. Confucius taught that every person must love others as he loves himself about 500 years before Hillel. When Judaism was still mandating the sacrifice of animals and the systematic extermination of entire populations (Canaanites and Amalekites), Buddha and the Jain god Mahavira had already instructed their followers to avoid harming not only human beings, but also any sentient creature, including insects. That said, for many centuries, Judaism was the humble religion of a small persecuted minority who, in the words of Yuval Noah Harari, “preferred reading and education to building empires and burning heretics at the stake.”

Rabbi Louis Jacobs has commented that Jewish moralists are fully aware that any conscious attempt to attain humility is always self-defeating. There is a notion in Hasidism that humility is not the mere absence of pride. Instead, it consists not so much in thinking of oneself as in not thinking of oneself at all. Annihilation of selfhood in Hasidut is not a conscious effort of the will. Any attempt to nullify the self by calling attention to it is bound to end in failure. By contrast, the mystics tend to suggest that the mind should be trained to completely overlook all considerations of both inferiority and superiority.

Adversity breeds community spirit - when times are tough, people grow, and everyone pulls in together. The death of Dame Vera Lynn earlier this year was mourned by generations of Brits who reminisced over a woman who engendered a spirit of solidarity in World War 2.

However, the true test of a nation is not how it can survive a crisis, but if it can survive a lack of crisis. The British Museum is filled with exhibits of civilisations such as the Akkadians, Sumerians and Assyrians, who all had their time in the sun, only to be relegated to the scrapheap of history. Speaking of the sun, there is also an exhibit there of the ancient Mesopotamian sun god “Shamash”, but that could form the subject of a whole different discussion. In any event, after winning early battles, these civilizations frequently became self-indulgent and decadent, in a way that God commanded, and in fact often pleaded with our forebears not to emulate. Whilst we are taught that humility is to be valued above pride, I beg to differ on this point. It should provide us with a tremendous sense of pride that our small nation has survived when so many others haven't.

As Stage 4 lockdown is upon us, perhaps I might conclude with the rousing words of Dame Vera Lynn, “We'll meet again, don't know where, don't know when, but I know we'll meet again some sunny day.”

Shabbat Shalom and stay safe

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