



GROWTH

At The

SHABBAT TABLE

PARSHAT EKEV

The Unique Feature

As Jews, we have a deep connection to Eretz Yisrael, our homeland, which the rest of the world obsesses over despite the fact that it's only the size of New Jersey. Naturally, there is no explanation for how such a small country has been in the global headlines throughout history and seemingly more so than ever today. This causes many to wonder: what is it exactly that is so special about the Land of Israel? After all, it's not the Swiss Alps; it doesn't have the oil of Saudi Arabia; it doesn't have the fertile plains of Kansas. What makes the Land of Israel so extraordinary?

R' Benzion Klatzko once shared a beautiful explanation. Most of us try very hard to do the right thing and please Hashem, but how do we really know with certainty what G-d thinks of us? Now, in this earth, there's no clear way to know for sure; we may have strong theories, inclinations, and feelings, but it's not like G-d openly speaks to each of us and gives us His full report. This is true of everywhere on the globe, except for one place. Yep, you guessed it – Eretz Yisrael.

The Land of Israel has a very diverse topography. You can go skiing on mountains like Har Chermon and then drive an hour and a half to a place where it's over a hundred degrees. Israel has got it all – mountains, vineyards, plains – you name it. Unique to the Holy Land is something called clockwork rain. Unlike America or other places, in which it can and does rain in any and every month of the year, Israel, due to its topography, only experiences rainfall in certain times of the year. Outside of its rainy season, it barely rains at all. Israel's clockwork rain thus comes with an interesting feature. If it doesn't rain when it's supposed to, the Land and its inhabitants are in big trouble. The Kinneret goes down; the vineyards, olive groves, and orchards thirst for water. A drought then ensues, in which the agriculture dies. There is actually an entire tractate in the Talmud called Ta'anit [lit. fasting] which discusses the protocol for what to do in such a situation. The Mishnah outlines that the congregation must wait a few weeks, and if they still lack rain, the Jews are to offer extra prayers and supplications before G-d. As the situation grows more and more dire, they set up a cycle of fasting and eventually practice other restrictions.

Thus, Hashem didn't give us this special piece of land for attractions or natural resources per se; He gave it to us as a gift because of its distinctive clockwork rain, which He uses to communicate with us whether or not He is pleased with us. And it's not just about whether or not there is a rainfall in general. There are two main types of rain: an early one to saturate the ground, which is necessary for seeds to sprout, and a late rain which is softer, because a severe downpour will wash away the seeds that have already been planted. It is through this – receiving the right type of rain at the right time – that Boreh Olam indicates His satisfaction in us.

Believe it or not, all this is rooted in the 2nd paragraph of Shema, which is in this week's Parsha. The Torah testifies: "And it shall be, if you listen diligently to My commandments... I will grant the rain for your land in season, early and late rain... take care not to be lured away... the Heavens will be restrained and there will be no rain and the ground will not yield its produce..." (Devarim 11:13-17)

The message behind all this is incredibly profound. Hashem gave us this means of communication because He desires, more than anything else, a relationship with us. This week, think of something small you can do to reciprocate the love, and hopefully the personal bond with G-d that we nurture will bring unimaginable bliss into our lives.

Essentials

There is a popular slogan that has been branded by a big clothing company: "Essentials: Fear of G-d." While religious and G-d fearing individuals couldn't agree more, I believe that Judaism would advertise a bit differently: "Essentials: Loving G-d."

As our spiritual giants explain, while serving G-d out of fear of punishment is important, it is the most basic and superficial form of *avodat Hashem*. Service to G-d from a place of deep love and appreciation, on the other hand, is on a much higher level and considerably more commendable.

Imagine a wedding in which, just prior to the ceremony, the marriage coach pulls the bride and groom aside and tells the groom: "You should just know, if you are ever caught cheating, your wife will slaughter you!" While the importance of remaining faithful to one's spouse goes without saying, it is also incredibly sad if that fear is what holds the marriage together.

In a similar vein, we would be remiss if our relationship with G-d is solely founded upon fear of punishment. Overall, it may work to keep one in line, but without the element of love, there lacks a drive to actually tune in to one's soul and actively do good and be a channel for G-dliness. Now, this isn't to denigrate the concept of *yir'at Shamayim*, but to redefine it. Individuals enraptured with Hashem graduate the basic dread of retribution and replace it with fear of letting down their beloved.

Refuah Sheleimah, b'toch she'ar cholei Yisrael:

Ariel Ben Frida Miriam Bat Bakol Frida Bat Yaffa
Rahamim Ben Shifra Heleni Orna Bat Chen Chana
Yitzchak Ben Naama Chana Bat Malka

"We rise to the top by serving those at the bottom."