



TIMELESS∞TORAH

Summer Reflections

EKEV: THE BLANK PAGE THAT IS STILL OURS TO WRITE

Anne Frank's final diary entry is one of the most moving passages ever written. On 1st August 1944, three days before she and her family were arrested, fifteen-year-old Anne tried to describe the struggle taking place within her. There was the cheerful, witty girl that everyone saw, and there was another self that she described as "much purer, deeper and finer." She ended with a line that has echoed through the generations: "I keep trying to find a way to become what I'd like to be and what I could be if... if only there were no other people in the world."

Then the diary ends. We know what happened next. We know why there are no more entries. Yet somehow the blank page that follows is not the real message of Anne's diary. The diary is not ultimately about how she died; it is about how she lived – a young girl wrestling with the timeless question of who she really was, and who she might become.

This question lies at the heart of Parshat Ekev. Moshe has just finished recounting some of the most dramatic moments in Jewish history: the revelation at Mount Sinai, the giving of the Ten Commandments, the sin of the Golden Calf, and his forty days on the mountain. Everything until this point has been national, historic and awe-inspiring. Then, suddenly, the focus changes. Moshe turns to every individual Jew and asks: 'And now, Israel, what does Hashem your God ask of you, but to fear Hashem your God, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve Hashem your God with all your heart and with all your soul?' (Devarim 10:12).

It is a remarkable shift in perspective. After all the miracles and shared destiny, Moshe

asks a deeply personal question. What does Hashem ask of you? Not the Jewish people in general, not your neighbour, not your family – you.

The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (d.1893), in his commentary *Ha'amek Davar*, notices something striking about this verse. The Torah seems to ask for everything at once: fear of Heaven, love of Hashem, walking in His ways, serving Him wholeheartedly and keeping His commandments. How can Moshe describe all of that as 'the only thing that Hashem asks of you'?

He answers that the verse is not speaking to everyone in exactly the same way. Hashem does not expect identical achievements from every person. He asks something different of each individual according to their abilities, circumstances and responsibilities. A communal leader has one task, a Torah scholar another, a parent another, and someone working hard to support a family another still. The question is never, "Why aren't you somebody else?" The question is always, "What is Hashem asking of you?"

This touches on one of Judaism's most profound ideas. We are not all meant to become the same person. We are not judged against someone else's potential. The challenge is to become the best version of ourselves. That is why Moshe's question is so demanding. Once we stop comparing ourselves with others, we can no longer hide behind the excuse that we lack someone else's talents or opportunities. Hashem asks only what is genuinely within our reach, but He does ask for that.

It is easy to spend life measuring ourselves against other people. We admire those who



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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seem more learned, more successful, more confident or more accomplished. We imagine that if only we had their abilities, we too could achieve great things. The Torah gently redirects our attention. The real question is not what someone else has achieved. The real question is what Hashem has placed in our hands. That is why the Chassidic masters often said that when a person reaches the World to Come, they will not be asked why they failed to become Moshe Rabbeinu. They will be asked why they failed to become themselves.

This idea gives Anne Frank's final words an even deeper resonance. She longed to discover who she could become beneath the expectations and judgments of other people. Most of us, thankfully, are granted the opportunity that she never had. Our pages are still blank. Our stories are still being written.

Moshe's question therefore becomes one of the most hopeful questions in the Torah: "What does Hashem your God ask of you?" Not everything. Not someone else's calling. Simply the next step that belongs to you: the next act of kindness, the next prayer said with a little more attention, the next moment of patience, the next mitzvah performed with greater care.

Perhaps that is why Moshe asks this question just before the people enter the Land of Israel. In the wilderness, everyone shared the same miraculous experience. In the Land, each person would build a different life, in a different place, with different challenges. The future of the Jewish people would depend on countless individual choices.

There is one further thought that adds another layer of depth to Moshe's words. The Kli Yakar (d.1619) asks why Moshe could speak as though fearing Hashem was such a modest request. His answer is that Moshe was addressing a generation that had witnessed the Exodus, Sinai and forty years of open miracles. For them, faith could not be an abstract idea; they had seen Hashem's presence with their own eyes. Every generation, he suggests, is judged according to the experiences it has been given. We may not have stood at Mount Sinai, but we have lived through our own extraordinary chapters of Jewish history. We belong to a generation that has seen the remarkable rebuilding of Jewish life after the Holocaust, the flourishing of Torah communities across the world, and the establishment of the State of Israel. Those experiences carry responsibilities of their own. Hashem asks of every generation what it is capable of becoming.

When we close Anne Frank's diary, we cannot help grieving for the life that was never allowed to unfold. When we read Parshat Ekev, however, the Torah reminds us that our own story is still unfolding. Hashem places the pen in our hands and asks a simple but searching question: not what someone else could have achieved, nor even what previous generations were asked to achieve, but what He asks of us. What will we do with the pages that remain?

**The weekly Timeless Torah Parsha Shiur
resumes in person after the summer
break on 26th August**