Parasha Ekev

וְהָיָה | עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֵת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַר יהוה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ אֶת-הַבְּרִית וְאֶת-הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ׃

This Shabbat I am at the United Messianic Jewish Assembly Conference in Atlanta, but as always I prepare a teaching for the Parasha rotation and post for all to read. I pray you glean for this week's d'rash. Let's begin... The name of the parasha begins with a curious word: *Ekev*. Most English translations render it, "because," "if," or "as a consequence of." Yet the Hebrew word itself literally means "heel." Immediately the sages begin asking why Moshe would choose such a word as he stands before Israel in his final speeches. The heel is the lowest part of the body. It is the portion that touches the dust. It receives little attention. We notice our eyes, our hands, our minds, but rarely think about our heels unless they hurt. The medieval commentator Rashi famously teaches that *ekev* alludes to the commandments that people tend to trample under their heels, the mitzvot considered small or insignificant. The opening verse therefore contains a profound warning: The covenant is not usually lost through dramatic rebellion. It is lost through neglected details. People rarely wake up one morning and decide to abandon God. Instead, they slowly begin stepping on things that once mattered. A neglected prayer. A forgotten blessing. An ignored commandment. A compromise here. A rationalization there. Eventually what was once treasured becomes dust beneath the heel. This insight perfectly introduces the entire parasha because Ekev is fundamentally about memory. Israel's greatest threat is not military defeat. It is forgetfulness. The great danger is not Pharaoh. The great danger is prosperity. Not slavery. Success. Not wilderness. Comfort. Moshe understands something about human nature that remains true today. People cry out to God in the desert. People often forget Him in abundance. Last week I spoke about remembering... this week... I want to continue that thought... I pray it doesn't seem redundant...

The Hebrew Scriptures repeatedly connect memory with covenant faithfulness. The Hebrew verb *zakar* means "to remember," but biblical remembrance is far more than mental recollection. In Western thinking, remembering means storing information. In Hebrew thinking, remembering means acting according to a reality. When God remembers Noah, He does not merely think about him. He acts. When God remembers Avraham, He intervenes. When Israel remembers God, they obey. Biblical memory always produces movement. Forgetting always produces drift. Thus the entire parasha becomes a struggle between remembering and forgetting. Moshe is standing before a generation that never knew Egypt personally. Many of them were born after the Exodus. The miracles are already becoming history. The stories are becoming tradition.

The danger is obvious. What one generation experiences directly, the next generation may know only intellectually. The same challenge faces every Messianic Jewish congregation. Every church. Every synagogue. Every family. One generation encounters God. The next generation inherits the story. The question becomes whether inherited faith becomes living faith. Moshe is trying to prevent covenant truth from becoming mere historical information. The Baal Shem Tov once taught: "The exile of Israel began when they forgot that they were princes." His point was not political but spiritual. Identity is lost before destiny is lost. People become what they remember. Israel must therefore remember who they are. The people of covenant. The people redeemed. The people chosen not because of greatness but because of grace. This theme becomes clear immediately. Moshe reminds Israel that God loved them. The Hebrew word for love is *ahavah*. Jewish commentators frequently note that divine love in Scripture is covenantal rather than sentimental. Modern culture often defines love as emotion. Biblical faith defines love as commitment. Adonai's love is not proven by feelings. It is proven by faithfulness. God keeps His promises. God remembers His covenant. God remains loyal. This covenant love becomes the foundation of all obedience. Israel does not obey in order to become chosen. Israel obeys because they already are chosen. This is where Jewish and Messianic readings beautifully converge. Traditional Judaism emphasizes covenant responsibility flowing from election. The Brit Chadasha likewise teaches that obedience flows from grace. Yeshua says: "If you love Me, keep My commandments." Notice the order. Love first. Obedience second. Relationship before responsibility. Covenant before commandment. This principle is deeply embedded within parasha Ekev. The commandments are not arbitrary rules. They are covenant responses. Adonai's faithfulness creates Israel's obligation. As Moshe continues, he emphasizes blessing. The Hebrew word *berakhah* derives from a root connected with abundance and flourishing. Yet biblical blessing differs radically from modern prosperity concepts. Blessing is not merely getting things. Blessing is experiencing life under God's favor. The sages often observed that a wealthy man can be cursed while a poor man can be blessed. The determining factor is not possession but relationship. A famous rabbinic story tells of a disciple who asked his teacher why righteous people sometimes suffered. The rabbi answered by pointing toward two trees. One tree grew quickly but shallowly. The other grew slowly but deeply. When storms arrived, the fast-growing tree fell while the deep-rooted tree remained. The rabbi explained that God often develops roots before fruit. The covenant blessing promised in Ekev is not superficial success. It is enduring stability. This idea becomes especially important because Moshe begins describing the abundance awaiting Israel. Milk and honey. Fertility. Harvest. Victory. Prosperity. Yet every blessing contains a hidden danger. Every gift can become an idol. Every provision can become a distraction. Every success can become a source of pride. This is why Moshe repeatedly redirects attention away from the gifts toward the Giver.

One of the most remarkable themes of Ekev is humility. The Hebrew word *anavah* means humility, but not self-hatred. Biblical humility is accurate self-understanding before God. Moshe himself is called the most humble man on earth.

Yet Moshe was also one of history's strongest leaders. Therefore, humility cannot mean weakness. Humility means recognizing dependence. Pride says: "I achieved this." Humility says: "God enabled this." Pride sees self as source. Humility sees self as steward. The contrast becomes clearer as Moshe recalls the wilderness. The wilderness served a purpose. God was not merely transporting Israel. He was transforming Israel. The desert became a classroom. The rabbis often asked why Torah was given in the wilderness rather than in a city. One answer states that wilderness symbolizes emptiness. Only an empty vessel can be filled. Only a teachable heart can receive revelation. This insight touches the heart of discipleship. God often uses seasons of dependence to teach lessons that prosperity cannot teach. The wilderness strips away illusions. There is no pretending in a desert. No abundance to hide behind. No wealth to trust. No institutions to lean upon. Only God. The Christian writer A.W. Tozer once observed: "It is doubtful whether God can bless a man greatly until He has hurt him deeply." Though stated strongly, the principle echoes Ekev. God frequently uses wilderness experiences to expose what truly controls the heart. Moshe explicitly says God humbled Israel. The Hebrew root involved carries the idea of affliction, lowering, or bringing into dependence. Modern readers sometimes struggle with this. Why would God humble His people? Because pride is incompatible with covenant intimacy. Pride always seeks independence. Faith always acknowledges dependence. The wilderness therefore reveals what already exists within the heart. Notice that Moshe does not say God created rebellion. He says God tested Israel to know what was in their hearts. This language appears throughout Scripture. Testing reveals. Testing exposes. Testing uncovers. A goldsmith does not place gold into fire to destroy it. He places it into fire to reveal it. Likewise, God uses circumstances to reveal hidden realities. The great Jewish philosopher Maimonides taught that many divine tests exist not for God's knowledge but for human discovery. The test reveals the person to himself. Peter echoes this same idea when he compares faith to refined gold. Both traditions understand trials as revelatory. God is exposing what already lies beneath the surface.

Then Moshe introduces one of the most famous statements in all Torah: Man does not live by bread alone. The Hebrew word for bread is *lechem*. Bread represents physical sustenance. Necessity. Survival. Daily provision. Yet Moshe says humanity requires more than bread. Human beings are not merely biological creatures. They are covenant creatures. The body needs food. The soul needs God. The rabbis frequently noted that animals live by instinct. Humans live by meaning. Without meaning, abundance becomes emptiness. Without purpose, success becomes futility.

Without God, bread itself loses significance. Yeshua famously quotes this verse during His temptation in the wilderness. The connection is profound. Israel spent forty years learning dependence. Yeshua spends forty days reenacting Israel's journey. Where Israel often failed, Messiah succeeds. Where Israel grumbled over bread, Yeshua trusts the Father. Where Israel doubted, Yeshua remains faithful. Thus, Ekev not only explains Israel's history. It prophetically points toward Messiah. The wilderness becomes a picture of discipleship. Every believer eventually discovers that bread alone is not enough. Careers are not enough. Money is not enough. Success is not enough. Even religious activity is not enough. Human beings were created for communion with God. As Augustine later wrote: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in You." That statement could easily serve as a summary of Ekev. Israel's challenge was not simply entering the land. It was entering the land without losing their dependence upon God. And that remains the challenge of every generation. The wilderness teaches dependence. The promised land tests whether dependence survives abundance. The greatest spiritual question of Ekev therefore becomes: Can Israel remember God when they no longer desperately need Him? Can blessing become worship rather than self-congratulation? Can prosperity become gratitude rather than pride? Can abundance deepen faith rather than replace it? Moshe knows the answer will determine the future of the covenant nation. And so, he continues building his case, moving toward one of the most sobering warnings in all of Deuteronomy: "Beware lest you forget." That warning becomes the central heartbeat of the remainder of the parasha.

Israel is standing at the threshold of blessing. The wilderness years are nearly over. The Jordan lies ahead. The Promised Land is visible. Yet Moshe is not celebrating military victories or agricultural abundance. Instead, he issues one of the most repeated warnings in all of Torah: "Beware lest you forget." The Hebrew word is *shakach*. At first glance it appears ordinary. Everyone forgets things. We forget appointments, names, directions, and dates. Yet biblical forgetting is not a failure of memory. It is a failure of covenant consciousness. In Scripture, forgetting God never means losing awareness that God exists. Israel never forgot God's existence. They forgot His authority. They forgot His provision. They forgot their dependence upon Him. The biblical concept of forgetting is therefore much deeper than absent-mindedness. It is spiritual drift. A person can still attend synagogue and forget God. A person can still attend church and forget God. A person can still speak religious language and forget God. One may retain theological information while losing covenant awareness. This is why Moshe repeatedly sounds the alarm. He understands something timeless about the human heart. The greatest enemy of faith is often familiarity. Miracles become expected. Blessings become normal. Provision becomes assumed. What once inspired gratitude becomes taken for granted. The sages often observed that familiarity is the mother of ingratitude. When manna first appeared, Israel marveled.

Forty years later it had become ordinary. What began as a miracle became routine. The same danger confronts every generation. The sunrise is miraculous, yet we barely notice it. Breath itself is miraculous, yet we rarely thank God for it. The preservation of Israel is miraculous, yet people often overlook it. The resurrection of Messiah is miraculous, yet many hear it so often that its wonder fades. The human heart possesses an extraordinary ability to normalize blessings. Moshe therefore fights against spiritual amnesia. He commands Israel to remember. Not occasionally. Continually. Not emotionally. Covenantally. Not merely through thought. Through action. The Jewish tradition developed countless practices designed to cultivate remembrance. Mezuzot on doorposts. Blessings before and after meals. Prayer cycles. Sabbath observance. Festivals. Tzitzit. These practices are not merely rituals. They are memory devices. They continually pull the heart back toward God. Rabbi Avraham Joshua Heschel once wrote: "The Sabbath is a sanctuary in time." His point was that God established sacred rhythms because human beings forget. Time itself becomes a teacher. The calendar becomes a witness. The festivals become living reminders. Memory is built into Jewish life. The Brit Chadasha continues this same principle. Yeshua establishes the memorial meal and says: "Do this in remembrance of Me." Again, remembrance is covenant action. The bread and cup are not merely educational symbols. They are acts of covenant memory. Both Jewish and Christian traditions therefore recognize a central truth: Faith survives through remembrance. The parasha now moves deeper into the nature of blessing. Moshe describes a land unlike Egypt. This contrast is crucial. Egypt represents human control. The Nile flooded predictably. Agriculture depended largely upon irrigation systems. Human effort played a visible role. Israel's land would be different. The Promised Land would depend upon rain from heaven. This is more than geography. It is theology. God is teaching Israel a new way of living. Egypt encouraged self-sufficiency. Canaan would require dependence. Every rainy season would remind Israel that life comes from above. Every drought would remind them of covenant realities. The land itself would become a teacher. The land would teach volumes. The hills and valleys would proclaim dependence upon God. The rabbis noted that Egypt received water from below while Israel received water from above. This distinction became symbolic. The world teaches people to look downward toward human strength. Torah teaches people to look upward toward divine provision.

This is one reason Moshe repeatedly emphasizes the eyes of God upon the land. The land is not merely territory. It is covenant space. It is sacred geography. It is the arena where Israel's relationship with God will be displayed before the nations. The concept reaches beyond agriculture. Every blessing in life raises the same question: Will this blessing increase dependence upon God or decrease it? The answer is never automatic. Blessings can become bridges to worship. Or they can become barriers. The same prosperity that leads one person to gratitude may lead another to pride.

This brings Moshe to one of the most famous warnings in Torah: "You may say in your heart, my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth." Notice where the danger begins. Not in speech. Not in action. In the heart. The Hebrew word *lev* means heart. Modern readers often think of the heart primarily as the seat of emotions. Hebrew thought is broader. The heart is the center of the entire inner person. Thought. Desire. Will. Intention. Decision. The heart is where identity is formed. The heart is where rebellion begins. The heart is where obedience begins. This explains why Scripture constantly focuses upon the heart. The issue is never merely behavior. Behavior flows from deeper realities. The issue is not merely what Israel does. The issue is what Israel loves. This truth appears repeatedly throughout Jewish literature. A famous story tells of a rabbi who asked his students: "Where does God dwell?" The students responded with various theological answers. The rabbi shook his head. Finally, he said: "God dwells wherever man lets Him in." The story captures an important biblical truth. God seeks not merely external conformity. He seeks the heart. Moshe understands that the real battle awaiting Israel is not military. The real battle is internal. Can the heart remain faithful amid prosperity? Can gratitude survive success? Can humility survive achievement? The danger of pride is particularly subtle. Most sins announce themselves. Pride disguises itself as virtue. Pride can wear religious clothing. Pride can quote Scripture. Pride can lead worship. Pride can teach Torah. Pride can preach sermons. Yet beneath the appearance lies self-exaltation. The sages frequently identified pride as the root from which many other sins grow. The Talmud contains strong statements regarding arrogance because arrogance competes with God for the throne of the heart. The proud person subtly becomes his own authority. The humble person remains teachable. This is why Moshe repeatedly reminds Israel of their failures.

At first glance this seems strange. Why recount the Golden Calf when entering the land? Why revisit rebellion? Why remember shame? Because memory creates humility. The generation must understand that the land is not being given because of their righteousness. This theme appears repeatedly. Not because you are righteous. Not because you are deserving. Not because you earned it. The covenant blessing is rooted in God's faithfulness. This is one of the most important theological truths in Ekev. The covenant rests upon grace. Jewish readers often emphasize God's faithfulness to the promises made to Avraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Messianic readers see the same principle fulfilled in Messiah. Both perspectives agree on a crucial point: God's faithfulness precedes human achievement. The land is a gift. The covenant is a gift. Salvation is a gift. Relationship begins with divine initiative. Moshe therefore retells the Golden Calf story. This episode stands as one of the darkest moments in Israel's history. The people had witnessed the Exodus. They had seen the sea divided. They had heard the voice of God at Sinai. Yet within weeks they fashioned an idol. The event exposes a disturbing reality. Miracles alone cannot transform the heart.

People often assume that if they saw enough evidence, faith would become easy. The Golden Calf disproves that assumption. Israel had overwhelming evidence. The problem was not information. The problem was the heart. This remains true today. Many people imagine that faith is primarily intellectual. Yet Scripture repeatedly reveals that faith is relational. The issue is not whether God has revealed Himself. The issue is whether human beings desire to submit to what He has revealed. The Golden Calf becomes a mirror. It reveals humanity's tendency to exchange the invisible God for visible substitutes. The idol may change. The temptation does not. Ancient idols were made of gold and stone. Modern idols may be careers, possessions, influence, entertainment, politics, or even religion itself. An idol is anything that receives the trust that belongs to God. This helps explain why Moshe spends so much time discussing the incident. The Golden Calf is not merely ancient history. It is an enduring diagnosis of the human condition.

The prophet Jeremiah later declares that the heart is deceitful above all things. The sages likewise recognized the power of the *yetzer hara*, the inclination toward evil. Jewish thought generally views human beings as possessing both a good inclination and an evil inclination. The struggle of spiritual life involves directing the heart toward God rather than toward self. Messianic believers often see Paul's discussions of flesh and spirit as closely related to this Jewish understanding. The terminology differs. The struggle remains the same. The heart must continually choose covenant faithfulness. The narrative now turns toward Moshe himself. Moshe describes forty days and forty nights before God. Again the number forty appears. Throughout Scripture, forty often signifies testing, preparation, and transformation. Forty days of rain during the Flood. Forty years in the wilderness. Forty days for Elijah. Forty days of Yeshua's temptation. Periods of forty mark transitions. Moshe stands between judgment and mercy. Israel deserves destruction. Yet Moshe intercedes. This intercession becomes one of the most powerful pictures in Torah. The mediator stands in the gap. The righteous one pleads for the guilty. The shepherd refuses to abandon the flock. Jewish tradition deeply honors Moshe for this act. The rabbis often portray him as the faithful advocate of Israel. Messianic believers naturally see a foreshadowing of Messiah. Moshe intercedes temporarily. Messiah intercedes continually. Moshe pleads for covenant preservation. Messiah secures covenant redemption. Yet both reveal the compassionate heart of God. The existence of a mediator demonstrates something profound. God desires restoration more than destruction. Judgment is real. Sin is serious. Yet mercy remains God's recurring invitation. The rabbis tell a story about a king whose son repeatedly rebelled. Each time the son returned, the king welcomed him. Finally the servants asked why. The king replied: "He is still my son." The story does not eliminate accountability. It reveals covenant love.

Ekev repeatedly holds justice and mercy together. God disciplines. Yet God restores. God corrects. Yet God remains faithful. This tension lies at the heart of biblical theology. Moshe has accomplished something remarkable; he has dismantled every illusion of self-righteousness. Israel cannot claim superiority. They cannot claim entitlement. They cannot claim self-sufficiency. They stand entirely dependent upon God's mercy. And that realization prepares them for one of the greatest commandments in the Torah, which Moshe asked the Israelites of old and to each of us today… What does the Lord require of you?

Moshe returns to the theme of memory once again. Remember what God has done. Remember Egypt. Remember the signs and wonders. Remember the wilderness. Remember the victories. Remember the preservation. Why this continual repetition? Because remembrance sustains identity. The rabbis compared memory to a lamp carried through darkness. Without it, people lose their bearings. Modern culture often assumes that progress requires forgetting the past. Biblical faith insists that survival requires remembering it. Israel's future depends upon remembering its story. Messianic believers likewise understand themselves through the story of redemption. The story provides meaning. The story provides direction. The story provides identity. As Moshe continues, he begins turning toward a climactic contrast that will dominate the final portion of the parasha. Two ways lie before Israel. Two possible futures. Two covenant outcomes. Blessing and curse. Life and death. Faithfulness and rebellion. The land itself will become the stage upon which those choices unfold. Yet before discussing consequences, Moshe first establishes the foundation. The issue is not behavior alone. The issue is the heart. A heart that remembers. A heart that loves. A heart that serves. A heart that has been circumcised of pride and opened to God. Only such a heart can sustain covenant faithfulness when prosperity arrives. And Moshe knows that prosperity is coming. The question that remains is whether Israel's heart will be ready for it. That question leads directly into the final movement of Ekev, where Moshe calls Israel to choose continual devotion to the God who has chosen them. Have you chosen continual devotion? I pray it be so…

b'Shem Yeshua, haMelech v'haMashiach Shelanu! Amein.
("in the name of Yeshua, our King and the Messiah! Amein.")

Baruch atah Adonai, Eloheinu meh-lech ha-o-lam, Asher natahn lanu to'raht emet, v'cha-yay olahm na-ta b'to'chaynu. Baruch atah Adonai, no'tane haTorah.
Blessed are you O Lord our God, King of the Universe, Who has given us a Torah of truth, and has planted eternal life in our midst. Blessed are You O Lord, Giver of the Torah.