

Head to Toe
Ekev, 5781
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The name of our portion—Ekev—derives from the second word of the parasha, *vehayah ekev tishmeun*. The first verse is usually translated as: And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, the LORD your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers” (7:12).

What does the word *ekev* mean?

Ramban sticks closely to the plain sense of the verse and translates Ekev as “because”; i.e. **because** you will listen to Hashem’s commandments, you will be rewarded.

Rashi, however, favors an approach that identifies the word *ekev* with the word, “heel.” Thus, Rashi writes: “If, even **the lighter** commands which a person usually treads on **with his heels** (i.e. which a person is inclined to treat lightly), ye will hearken to” (7:12).

Rashi’s approach begs for deeper analysis and commentary. After all, what is considered a “lighter commandment?” And what is a commandment that a person usually “treads on with his heels?”

Answers to these questions can be derived from how later commentators develop Rashi’s interpretation.

Some commentators focus on the importance of the phrase the “lighter commandments,” while others focus on the importance of the word *ekev*.

Rav Shlomo Wolbe writes that the “lighter commandments” is a reference to the unnoticed everyday actions that we often overlook or discount, but which are actually the most important ones, as they speak to our true character more than the so-called larger actions.

“Why are small actions so crucial, to the point that they have the power to activate great blessing or, God forbid, trigger terrible punishment? Why are they the litmus test for determining greatness?”

Grandiose deeds are not testimony to one’s benevolence, nor is refraining from several aveiros indicative of one’s fear of Heaven. Often, big mitzvos are accompanied by pomp, which makes it easier to perform them. A person might more readily donate \$10 million to a charitable institution that will put his name on their building than give a significantly smaller donation to an organization that will send him no more than a simple receipt.

Similarly, one might have a guilty conscience when it comes to serious aveiros while he feels not a twinge of regret...committing other aveiros that seem insignificant to him. Therefore the Torah was not so ‘concerned’ about serious aveiros, since a person’s conscience usually prompts him to avoid those aveiros and to do teshuvah if he transgressed. It is the small aveiros, which

people trample on daily and for which they never repent, that remain with a person until the Day of Judgment. It is only great people who are meticulous with every small action” (Rav Wolbe on Chumash, 329).

The true measure of a person’s soul is not how we act when interacting with someone more powerful but rather, with someone who is more vulnerable. It is easy to be polite and respectful to a CEO, but is that same person polite and respectful to a homeless person? Is a person generous with a taxi driver and a restaurant server when hardly anyone will ever know how we have acted? These are the “lighter commandments” which speak to a person’s true nature.

Who amongst us will never be vulnerable and in need?

The following story is told about Reb Zusha, the brother of Reb Elimelech:

On the festival of Sukkot Reb Zusha would bring several simple folk and untutored men to his home, to give them food and drink and to rejoice with them. Some of his friends asked him why he did this, and he replied: “In the future, when tzaddikim will sit in the sukkah made of the skin of the Leviathan (a giant mythical sea creature), Zusha will also go, and he will want to join them and enter the sukkah, but they will not let him. They will say: Should you, Zusha the simple one, merit to sit in the place where the tzaddikim sit? Now Zusha can come and argue: he too brought simple folk and unlearned men into his sukkah (The Holy Brothers, 80-81).

Thus, one understanding of the word *ekev* is to not trample on those commandments which we incorrectly take for granted.

There is another lesson that comes to mind when we interpret the word *ekev* as heel.

Rav Shlomo Zevin says that the meaning of this verse is that we should serve Hashem from head to heel. Rav Zevin writes:

The midrash explains, “until you observe my commandments all the way until the heel.” Until the heel, and not with the hill; i.e. from the head until the heel. In mystical literature this hints to the month of Tishrei and the holiday of Rosh Hashanah which are referred to as the head of the year.... It is impossible to ask a person to maintain throughout the entire year the same spiritual intensity that one feels on Rosh Hashanah.... Therefore, if Rosh Hashanah is to be viewed as a head, then the whole year should be viewed as a heel.

In other words, to serve Hashem means that we should serve Hashem from the beginning of the year (the head) all the way until the heel (the rest of the year). We should encourage ourselves to channel the spiritual intensity from the most sacred moments of the year to the mundane activities of our daily life.

We can understand Rav Zevin's idea symbolically as a message to serve Hashem with intensity from the beginning of the year through the end of the year. But we can also understand his theme more literally; i.e. that we should serve Hashem from head to heel—with our whole entire body.

The paradigmatic example of a mitzvah in which we serve Hashem with our whole body is the mitzvah of residing in a sukkah—the subject of our current studies in daf yomi. When we dwell in a sukkah we are serving Hashem from head to heel.

This week in our daf yomi studies we came across the following Mishnah:

One who sleeps beneath the bed in the sukka did not fulfill his obligation, because the bed constitutes a tent that serves as a barrier between him and the roofing of the sukka. Rabbi Yehuda said: It was our custom that we would sleep beneath the bed before the Elders and they did not say anything to us to the effect that we are not fulfilling our obligation. Apparently, the halakhic status of the bed is not like that of a tent and it does not prevent fulfillment of the mitzva. Rabbi Shimon said, contrary to the opinion of Rabbi Yehuda: There was an incident involving Tavi, the Canaanite slave of Rabban Gamliel, who was sleeping beneath the bed, and Rabbi Gamliel lightheartedly said to the Elders: Did you see my slave Tavi, who is a Torah scholar and knows that slaves are exempt from the mitzva of sukka? Since it is a positive, time-bound mitzva, Canaanite slaves, whose status with regard to this halakhic category is like that of women, are exempt from the obligation to fulfill the mitzva of sukka. Therefore, he sleeps under the bed. Rabbi Shimon continued: And by the way, as Rabban Gamliel was not issuing a halakhic ruling, we learned that one who sleeps beneath the bed did not fulfill his obligation (Sukkah, 20b).

This is a very ironic story and a difficult one for us moderns to wrap our heads around. Obviously, the very fact that the Talmud legalizes slavery is abhorrent and repulsive to us. It is a shameful historical reality that some of our biblical and Talmudic ancestors were slaveowners. We cannot deny this. (We shudder in fear about the fact that we too are no doubt committing sinful offenses that will be very embarrassing to our descendants.)

In this particular case, the slave, Tavi, is also a learned scholar. The Talmud elsewhere describes him as a person worthy of receiving rabbinic ordination (Yoma, 87a). He was also extraordinarily close with Rabban Gamliel. We are told that Rabban Gamliel mourned for him after his death and desperately tried to free him from slavery (Berachot, 16b). Rabban Gamliel was unable to free him directly as in his opinion it was against Biblical law (Bava Kamma, 74b).

Rabban Gamliel accorded Tavi enormous respect and cited Tavi's actions in order to establish the following point in Jewish law:

According to halakha one is obligated to sleep in a sukkah. What about if one sleeps underneath a bed in a sukkah? Do we view the bed as being its own independent domain and thereby negate the fact that one is also in a sukkah? The Mishnah records a dispute about this

law. Enter Tavi. As a slave, Tavi was exempt from sleeping in a Sukkah. Therefore, Tavi specifically slept underneath the bed in order to demonstrate that by sleeping under the bed one does not fulfill the mitzvah of sleeping in a sukkah.

The Babylonian Talmud leaves the story here and does not mine it further. However, the Jerusalem Talmud presses the point and asks the obvious question: If Tavi is not obligated to sleep in a sukkah, why did he bother sleeping under the bed, when he could have just slept inside the house? The Talmud answers that Tavi slept under the bed in order to hear the words of the Sages and learn from their *divrei torah* (cited in Tosafot, s.v. *raitem*, 20b).

In this telling of the story, Tavi reaches heroic heights. He has reached the level of Hillel who sat in the snow and remained on top of a skylight in order to hear the words of the Sages and consequently became so sick that he needed to be revived (Yoma, 35b). Like Hillel, Tavi sacrificed his entire body in order to serve Hashem. So while Tavi was not required to serve Hashem with his entire body by dwelling in a sukkah, he still managed to serve Hashem with his whole body by listening to every sound of Torah even while dwelling under a bed. Tavi wanted to serve Hashem with his heel, so to speak—and he did so by sleeping underneath the bed.

The Jerusalem Talmud (also cited by Tosafot) tells us that Tavi did not only serve Hashem with his heel by lying on the floor, but he also wore tefillin. As a slave, Tavi was exempt from tefillin. By wearing tefillin, Tavi served Hashem from head to toe.

The stories of Zusha bringing the simple Jews into the sukkah, and of Tavi sleeping under the bed in the sukkah, are really our stories. We are all unworthy of entering into Hashem's palace. However, if we push ourselves to serve Hashem with our entire body, then we will somehow gain entry.

The tefillin of the head are referred to as our crown. When Tavi wore the tefillin he was actually crowning himself as a servant of Hashem.

According to the prophets Tavi's story will one day be our story.

In the haftorah for this week's portion we are promised that we will be served by kings and queens who will lick the dust off our heels:

"Kings shall tend your children, Their queens shall serve you as nurses. They shall bow to you, face to the ground, And lick the dust of your feet. And you shall know that I am the LORD— Those who trust in Me shall not be shamed" (Isaiah 49:23).

When we serve Gd as faithful servants despite being treated as heels by our enemies, and when we serve God with our whole body—from our head to our heels, then we will soar to spiritual heights and be able to serve Gd while wearing crowns.

You can now watch a Youtube recording of Rabbi Herzfeld's D'var Torah:
<https://youtu.be/p84J0YJqjv4>