

## **This Week in Torah *Ekev***

A Bar Mitzvah stands on the *bema* in front of the open ark. As he looks to the right, there stands 2 or maybe 3 generations that came before him—his parents, grandparents and if so blessed—great grandparents. Torah is being handed down to him *L'dor vaDor*—from one generation to the next. And he becomes the next link in the chain of tradition. Echoing the words of the Psalmist who said [119:112]: “My heart is inclined to follow Your laws forever...” the Bar Mitzvah assumes his place as an heir to Torah’s legacy.

That verse from Psalms is perfect for this week’s *drash*. The word “forever” in Hebrew as it appears in the Psalm is the name of our *sedra*: *ekev*. But that word doesn’t necessarily mean “forever”—it is a strange word that has different connotations based on the context. As our Torah portion opens up, the word *EKEV* appears as an adverb, describing the way to guard/do God’s teachings: “And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant made on oath with your fathers...”

The Torah commentators seem to struggle with the word *EKEV*. The 12<sup>th</sup> century Spanish grammarian Ibn Ezra defines the word as a conjunction of sorts and translates it as “because”—he linked the results to proceeding verses of Laws to show cause and effect. 13<sup>th</sup> century Chuzkani was a literalist and defined *EKEV* as a reward—if we do, then *EKEV* God will bestow a blessing upon us. Then there was RaSHI who played on the words’ *shoresh*/root. He noted that it means “heel” as in the patriarch Jacob’s name—*YA’AKOV* he held onto the heel of his brother Esau. RaSHI’s interpretation is a bit of a homely of sort: follow all the rules, “even the lighter commands that one treads lightly on with one’s heels.” That means for even the ones which we don’t fully comprehend, we do so gently but diligently.

RaSHI is onto something—*EKEV* is about attachment. Like Jacob who held onto the heel of his brother, living by Torah is like clutching onto the merits of previous generations. We hold onto them by holding on to their virtues. Like the words of the Psalmist who said: “My heart is inclined to follow Your laws forever...” we cling to Torah and therefore have a connection to God. Observing *mitzvot*, acting righteously, and

doing what is expected of us--- these are ways that *EKEV* is real for us. It is a reward, a conjunction and a gentle push when we are uncertain--- all at the same time.

When translating the opening verse, it is easy to read it as “And if you do obey these rules and observe them carefully, your God will maintain faithfully for you the covenant made on oath with your fathers...” But the richness of the Hebrew language shows us that this verse is more than a cause-and-effect. It is a rich connection to our past, a valued consequence of doing the right thing, and a prize that helps us keep that chain of tradition alive and well for yet another generation.

*L'dor vador nagid gadlecha*—from one generation to the next, we make known God’s greatness.