

Parashat Ekev

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In today's parashah, Ekev, from Deuteronomy: the Israelites are finally about to enter the Promised Land, after forty, tortuous years of wandering. Moses admonishes them "And now, O Israel, what does the Lord your God demand of you? Only this: to revere the Lord your God, to walk only in His paths, to love Him, and to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and soul, keeping the Lord's commandments and laws, which I enjoin upon you this day, for your own good."

"To walk in God's ways" means to treat others in God's image with acts of compassion and kindness; to show no favors and take no bribes; uphold the cause of the widow and orphan; befriend the stranger providing him with food and clothing. God's greatness, according to Moses, is based on morality, fairness, and compassion for the weakest members of society.

In Jewish history, Moses, himself, qualifies as one of the greatest individuals, but if I were asked "Who was the greatest person in your life?," I would answer, without hesitation, my grandfather, Shimshon (Z"l) of blessed memory. Like Moses, leading the Israelites out of Egypt, Grampa was a hero who led his wife and four children out of Russia with its religious and political oppression and threat of pogroms. In 1905, when my mother was a baby, Grampa went to America and worked a whole year to earn money to bring his family over first-class. Instead, they were put into steerage and survived a miserable voyage, living on some cookies Gramma baked for the journey. Grampa was furious, complained to the travel agent, but never got an apology or his money back. Nevertheless, he was grateful to God they were all healthy and safe in America.

When Grampa was a new immigrant in Holyoke, Massachusetts who didn't know English, a smart salesman sold him a subscription to the Readers' Digest. He told me, laughingly, "I was just a greenhorn then and didn't know from nutting." Eventually, in his mid-thirties, after he moved to Detroit with Gramma and two more children born in the U.S., Grampa may have attended night school, but mostly taught himself to read and write English, while working days at whatever job it took to support his family (e.g., tailor, barrel maker, shopkeeper). Forty years later, he read at least two newspapers daily, English and Yiddish, cover to cover and could tell you everything that was happening in Detroit and the world.

He appreciated the freedoms of America. and was not afraid to speak his mind. He especially disliked and distrusted what he called "crooked politicians" and "suckers," as in "bloodsuckers" who scammed the poor, illiterate, or unsuspecting. Proud of his citizenship, voting at almost every election, missing rarely, only due to illness, he once soiled his pants and shoes, walking to a voting booth located in a vacant lot flooded with melting snow, many mud puddles and no paved access from the adjacent sidewalk. Outraged, he wrote a beautifully expressed letter, a handwritten copy of which I've saved all these years. It reads in part: " To the "Honorable City Election Officials...I am not a young man and cannot jump over...Hope by the next election in April to be moved this wooden shanty...so my selve also others will be able to go in to vote not to stay in the house." The next election, they moved it.

When Daddy died at age forty-five, Grampa showed compassion and love for my mother, older sister and me. He said, "Why should you be all alone? Come and live with me. I have a big house." It wasn't really a "big" house, but he had a big heart and it was the right thing to do. Many years later, my sister and I agreed he saved our lives, not only physically, by giving us shelter, but emotionally, by giving us love and a sense of belonging. What would have happened to us if it hadn't been for Grampa? We'd been living in an upper flat, three houses down the street for four years, an unhappy, frightening

time. Before that, in my memory, for the first six years of my life, we'd always lived with our grandparents. It was our true home.

Grampa loved life, happy and grateful for each day he was alive. He had two main interests: God and family. Living with him was both an inspiration and privilege to observe how he experienced joy in simple things. Every morning, with a contented look on his face, he carefully went through the rituals of putting on tallis and tefilin, reciting prayers from an ancient, well-thumbed book, facing the eastern light from the dining room window. At other times, he was busily involved in projects around the house: hammering and sawing, tending to the yard, sewing on an old Singer sewing machine, helping prepare for holidays, all the while humming and singing a wordless song "Di de di de di de." He was always doing something interesting. Nothing ever went to waste; he was very creative in his reuse of old materials. He cared about nature, fed birds during the winter and even provided water for them. He helped Gramma with many household tasks, e.g., taking out and burning trash in the alley; carrying Pesach dishes up and down the basement stairs; grating horseradish, smiling, while tears streamed from his eyes.

With Grampa, every religious observance was special, but every Shabbos was extra-special, beginning with Friday afternoon. He must have spent about three hours taking a bath and shaving, but when he came downstairs, smelling like Old Spice, he looked very handsome, impeccably dressed with creased pants and crisp, white shirt, which he'd ironed himself. When I complimented him, he replied "Oy boy, that's a dandy, eh?" Occasionally, on Shabbos morning, I walked to shul with my grandparents, mostly sitting upstairs with Gramma and watching all the men downstairs having all the fun, except on Simchas Torah when I got the chance to go down and join Grampa on the main floor.

Before Pesach one year, Grampa returned from a winter in Florida. As I was coming to welcome him, I couldn't believe my eyes! I saw this eighty-two year old step into the living room, bend over and kiss the carpet, saying "Thank Gott, I am home!"

When Gramma died in her sleep at age seventy-eight, they'd been married sixty-two years. She was sixteen; he was eighteen; it was an arranged marriage. When Grampa came home after the funeral, I heard him say: "Oy, Goldie! Why did you have to die *first* and leave me all alone?" Several years later, Grampa married my girlfriend's grandmother, who was the attractive widow of one of his long-time friends from shul.

Many times, I questioned Jewish customs and practices, e.g., "Grandpa, on Shabbos, why can't I touch the light switch or draw and color or cut with scissors?" No matter what I asked, his answer was always the same, with slightly different wording: "Because at Mount Sinai, God gave the Torah and Ten Commandments to Moses for the Jewish people." Studying this parashah has given me the opportunity to find some meaning to his answer, but I still have a long way to go. Grampa set an example of how to live a life "walking only in God's paths," striking an admirable balance between the importance of ritual and the recognition that ritual is only one part of what God expects of us. To love God is to act like God— to follow the path of compassion and kindness.