



YOUNG ISRAEL OF GREAT NECK

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The Parsha in Practice

Feeling Powerless

45%. That's how much battery power I have left in my laptop. That number is usually not something I think about until the "ding" sounds alerting me to a "low battery," but today is different. Tropical Storm Isaias, (he can't possibly be related to the Isaiah I know, who spoke with such comforting tones last week in our Haftorah, right?) has robbed us of electrical power, and so how much battery power I have left is of particular importance today. 41%. Hurry!



Powerlessness seems to be the primary theme of the day, the week, and frankly, the past 5 months. We keep repeating how we wish we knew more, how we'd love to plan for the future, but "we just don't know." It wasn't always like this.

The Torah speaks of times in a land "lacking nothing, a land whose rocks are iron and from whose hills you can mine copper," that after "we have eaten our fill... built fine houses to live in, our herds and flocks have multiplied and our silver and gold have increased, and everything we own has prospered," we would be capable of imagining that "My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me." (Devarim 8)

There are times in all of our lives when we feel smug and self-satisfied. We take in all that we have, look at all that we have accomplished, and are pretty impressed with ourselves and might think: "Look at me! I'm pretty remarkable!" Of course, we would never say this out loud, but **וְאָמַרְתָּ בְּלִבְּךָ**, we might speak of this in our heart (8:17). The Torah insightfully suggests that this is the sort of thing we might think, but never say.

Why do we think this way? Ibn Ezra notes how the first-generation Jews might “forget that they were once lowly slaves, or forget how hungry, thirsty, and impoverished they were in the desert.” To Ibn Ezra, כָּחִי וְעַצְמִי יָדִי is not an arrogance problem, it’s not that we think we are all-powerful, instead, it’s a problem of memory. We simply forget how little we once had and how in need we once were.

With only 27%(!) left on the battery, or pandemics in the news, it is easy to remember our frailty. When we are in a moment of stress or struggle, when our כָּח and “power” is threatened, it is easy to reflect on our vulnerabilities and to perceive the fuller picture of our lives and where our Creator belongs in context. But when the crisis ends and the power returns, when the anxiety has lifted and the vaccine is spread, what becomes of that humility? Will we remember those difficult moments and recall how dependent we truly are? Or will we just revert to our default and take all the credit?

I believe that in his formulation, Moshe was hinting towards a solution to this problem of memory. What is the response to someone who claims כָּחִי וְעַצְמִי יָדִי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת־הַחַיִּל הַזֶּה? Moshe says:

וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת־הַיְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ כִּי הוּא הֵנְתֵן לְךָ כֹּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת חַיִּל לְמַעַן הִקִּים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֲשֶׁר־נִשְׁבַּע לְאַבְתָּרֶיךָ כִּי־וְעַתָּה הַיּוֹם:

*But **remember** the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, **as it is today.***

Those final words, כִּי־וְעַתָּה הַיּוֹם are difficult to understand. Do they mean that the covenant referred to is still in effect? Or that - even today - we should remember that it is G-d who provides for us? Aren’t those messages obvious?

Perhaps the emphasis is on כִּי־וְעַתָּה הַיּוֹם, literally, “a day like today.” On a day when things seem most delicate and our paths most unsure. On a day when your batteries blink their last bars and you cannot imagine how you will make it to the end. On a day when we remember how much help from Above we truly require just to make it through, **that day** is the day we should וְזָכַרְתָּ, vividly remember and imprint in our mind’s eye so that we never forget כִּי הוּא הֵנְתֵן לְךָ כֹּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת חַיִּל, that it is truly He who provides us with the powers to succeed.

Moshe teaches that our arrogance is not a function of a haughty present, it’s the result of forgetting our humble past. It is remembering days like these, with our batteries almost depleted, that remind us who is really in charge. 11%. Phew.

Shabbat Shalom!

Shmuel Ismach