

Gratitude: The Cycle of Connection and Complacency

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The aroma of bread baking in the oven arouses anticipation.

One whiff and in comes the flood of memories of tasting Shabbat challah, or just being nourished after waiting for food. Ah, the taste of fresh bread!

I will never forget smelling baked bread in 2009 in Jaffa. I was in a theater, sitting transfixed watching the performance by [Na LaGa'at](#), “*Not by Bread Alone*.” The title comes from this week’s parashah *Eikev*. The actors were baking the bread during their performance. Each actor in this unique theater was blind and deaf and found a way to communicate their story to us that was mesmerizing. Halfway through the show, the smells drifted from the ovens filling the theater. It awakened pleasure, expectation, and then awareness, a slow softening of the heart as it dawned on us in the audience, not by any statement, but by an unspoken invitation into another person’s world, that the people on the stage have one sense that they share with us, that of smell. We experienced it together.

People do not live by bread alone (Deuteronomy 8:3.)

We take so much for granted. Even when we are schooled in *mussar*, and do our best to be attuned to gratitude, we slip. We feel entitled or forget our privilege. We eat and are satisfied and do not pay attention to our blessings or to God.

This is what Moses anticipated. This is what God understood. *Eikev* is like a drumbeat of hearing that when we “will enter the land,” we will become complacent. Moses keeps telling the Israelites – us – that we will experience “stuff”: food, shelter, and then perhaps more, and become self-satisfied. We will think somehow that we deserve what we have. We will forget God and our commitment to the stranger, to all people.

Connecting to the people around us requires constant vigilance. We retreat in times of challenge to take care only of ourselves, our hearts no longer as soft, or, in the words of *Eikev*, our hearts “uncircumcised”: “Circumcise the foreskin of your hearts and stiffen your necks no more” (Deut. 10:16). We can even become complacent only moments after feeling so connected. *Eikev* feels so repetitive only because life is like that. We cycle between connection and complacency. We remember and live the *middot*, and then forget and become full of ourselves. We speak out about racial justice, about economic inequities; we bring food to a neighbor in mourning and bring food to a food shelf. Then perhaps a day goes by or two or three and we tell ourselves it is ok to be a little satisfied and maybe we become a little self-absorbed and care a little less, our hearts not as attuned to compassion and suffering.

The antidote is strengthening our *middah* of gratitude. That is the essence of *Eikev*. We are commanded to bless God for the *good* land after we are satisfied (Deut. 8:10). We lift up the good (*hakarat hatov*) - if we choose – by bringing an awareness of appreciation multiple times through the day. Every time we eat. Every time we smell bread. I am satisfied, thank God. Thank God. Thank God. Whatever I have, I am grateful.

Part of *Eikev* is this “will”, the need to express blessing and gratitude after achieving, after having, after feeling satisfied. But there is also what Rabbi Shai Held names as “grace”¹ that comes from God. We cannot do it alone. We can develop our interior life that is open and connected, but we will be complacent at times and need then God’s help to see what we have as a gift, a as a blessing.

Rabbi Mordechai Gifter (1915-2001) teaches “We humans have a tendency to always want more. Therefore, it is easy to forget to feel grateful and happy with the good that we already have. We should strive to feel a joy that is complete. Lack of joy with what we have is destructive both physically and spiritually.”²

At the moment that I smelled the baking bread, the aroma that I shared with the people on stage who could neither see nor hear, I knew I was grateful both for all of my senses and for the joy that these people conveyed to me, the grace of their many blessings.

FOR FOCUS:

- Who reminds you of what you are grateful for in your life?
- When have you seen only “lack of” (and felt pity) and then were surprised by witnessing “joy”?
- When are you lulled into complacency? What times of the day or week? What are you fleeing when it happens and why?
- What helps you to (re)experience connection? How does it feel?

¹ Rabbi Shai Held, *Eikev*, “Will and Grace... or Who will circumcise my heart?” from *The Heart of Torah* pp. 220-224.

² Every Day, Holy Day, Alan Morinis, p. 4.