**Feeling the Earth – AYIN and *Parshat Eikev***

**Less is More**

Many years ago, when I was in college, I was over at the Chabad house for *Shabbos.* The *rebbetzen* and I were talking about food and health, when suddenly she jumped up and said she needed to show me a new product she was using. She returned with a bottle of some kind of juice.

“Do you know what this is?” she asked eagerly.

I recognized the bottle from my father’s house, because my father always had the latest health products. It was a bottle of “noni juice,” which was purported to have amazing health properties. But, there was something funny about the label on the bottle.

On the noni juice labels I had seen in the past, there was a picture of a muscular, shirtless Hawaiian man chugging a big glass of noni juice. On this bottle that the *rebbetzen* had in her hand, the picture was *almost* exactly the same, except – the man had a colorful Hawaiian shirt on!

“Wait a minute! Why does that guy have a shirt on?” I asked.

“Oh,” she replied, “it’s because we requested that the company change the picture to a guy with a shirt so that it would be permitted for us to buy it. It would be forbidden for us to buy any product with a shirtless man on the label.”

“But what’s wrong with a having no shirt?” I asked. “Isn’t the human body holy? Are you saying there’s something wrong with the human body?”

“Not at all,” she replied. “The point of spirituality is to make you more sensitive. A lot of secular culture is extremely stimulating, having a desensitizing effect. By keeping bodies covered, we enhance our sensitivity to the sacredness of the human form.”

You may or may not agree with the Chabad standards of *tzniyut* (modesty), but her underlying point is true: The more we get, the less sensitive we become to what we already have – hence the tendency to always want MORE.

This is so obvious with children. We want the best for them. We want to give them everything. And yet, the more we give, often the more they want. Giving them more and more doesn’t always satisfy them more; it can create spoilage. So, it turns out, *if we want to give them more, we sometimes have to give them less.*

**Parshat Eikev**

וְהָיָ֣ה עֵ֣קֶב תִּשְׁמְע֗וּן אֵ֤ת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים֙ הָאֵ֔לֶּה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּ֥ם וַעֲשִׂיתֶ֖ם אֹתָ֑ם וְשָׁמַר֩ יְהֹוָ֨ה אֱלֹהֶ֜יךָ לְךָ֗ אֶֽת־הַבְּרִית֙ וְאֶת־הַחֶ֔סֶד אֲשֶׁ֥ר נִשְׁבַּ֖ע לַאֲבֹתֶֽיךָ׃

***V'hayah eikev tishma’un*** *– It shall be a reward if you listen to these rules and guard them and do them, then Existence your Divinity will guard for you the covenant and the kindness was sworn to your ancestors…*

*- Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 7:12, *Parshat Eikev*

The sentence contains a strange idiom – the word עֵקֶב *eikev* really means “heel,” but it is understood here to mean “reward” or “because” or “consequence.” This is probably related to the English idiom when we say that something “follows on the heels” of another thing.

When Reb Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch (b. 1789) was little boy, his grandfather would teach him Torah. One time, when they were studying a portion about Abraham, they came to this verse:

עֵ֕קֶב אֲשֶׁר־שָׁמַ֥ע אַבְרָהָ֖ם בְּקֹלִ֑י

*“****Eikev*** *asher shama Avraham b’koli- Because (eikev) Abraham listened to my voice…”*

*- Bereisheet* (Genesis) 26:5

Menachem Mendel’s grandfather asked him to explain it. The child said, “Abraham heard God’s Voice even with his *eikev –* even withhis heel!”

The grandfather, Reb Shneur Zalman, was ecstatic with his answer and said, “In fact we find this same idea in another verse- *“V’hayah eikev tishma’un-* It will be the reward if you listen...’ This verse tells us we should strive to become so sensitive that even our *eikev –* our heel – should ‘listen,’ meaning that we should sense the holiness that permeates all creation even with the most insensitive part of our bodies.”

How do we do that?

We must be our own parent – we must restrict ourselves.

The most astonishing thing I think I’ve ever seen was on television, several days after a huge earthquake in Haiti. A man was searching day and night for his wife who was buried somewhere under a collapsed building. After something like five days, a voice was heard from beneath the rubble. Men dug furiously toward the voice. Soon they pulled out this man’s wife. She had been buried, no space to move, no food or water for several days.

What did she do? She sang hymns!

As they pulled her out, she was moving and singing. She was clapping her hands, crying “Hallelujah!”

I couldn’t believe it. Incomprehensible. But there it was: she was singing in gratitude for her life, for the sunlight, for being able to move. That’s sensitivity.

This is the whole point of all of those traditional spiritual practices that restrict you in some way, such as fasting. Their message is: don’t keep going in the direction of “more.” Go in the direction of less, even if just for a small period of time. This is the potential gift of suffering.

וַֽיְעַנְּךָ֮ וַיַּרְעִבֶ֒ךָ֒ ... לְמַ֣עַן הוֹדִֽיעֲךָ֗ כִּ֠י לֹ֣א עַל־הַלֶּ֤חֶם לְבַדּוֹ֙ יִחְיֶ֣ה הָֽאָדָ֔ם כִּ֛י עַל־כׇּל־מוֹצָ֥א פִֽי־יְהֹוָ֖ה יִחְיֶ֥ה הָאָדָֽם׃

*“You were afflicted and hungered… so that you would know – ki lo al halekhem levado yikhyeh ha’adam- not by bread alone does a person live, but by everything that comes out of the Divine mouth does a person live!”*

*- Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 8:3, *Parshat Eikev*

In other words, to truly *live,* you have to *feel* your most basic needs. You have to hunger a little. Otherwise, you won’t appreciate your life and sustenance as a gift, as coming from the “Divine mouth.”

And, while fasting and other traditional restrictions can be useful aids, you can actually practice this in a small but powerful way every time you are about to eat:

Rather than just digging in, take a moment. Delay the first bite. Appreciate. Say a *brakha* (blessing) – either the traditional one or something in your own words. When you are finished, don’t just get up and go. Take a moment.

As it says only a few verses later:

וְאָכַלְתָּ֖ וְשָׂבָ֑עְתָּ וּבֵֽרַכְתָּ֙ אֶת־יְהֹוָ֣ה אֱלֹהֶ֔יךָ עַל־הָאָ֥רֶץ הַטֹּבָ֖ה אֲשֶׁ֥ר נָֽתַן־לָֽךְ׃

*“You shall eat, and you shall be satisfied, and you shall bless Existence, your Divinity, for the good land which is given to you…”*

* 8:10

This verse is the basis for the *mitzvah* of saying a blessing after eating. Blessings in general are a wonderful way to curb the impulse to reach after the next moment for fulfilment, and instead open in gratitude to the gifts that are already present and thereby bring sensitivity even to the “heel” – in this case, meaning the ordinarily physical act of eating.

**Absolute Certainty of the Eye**

As a symbol for awareness, *ayin* עrepresents this sensitivity, but it also means “eye,” and so also implies “seeing” what is true for yourself, rather than relying on hearsay; ע *ayin* is a move from the maps of the thinking mind to direct perception. On the deepest level this is not merely the perception of what is happening “out there,” but the perception of perception itself; it is the knowing that *we are that perception*, that we are the ע *ayin,* the eye that opens in the universe.

The infamous and much hated Rabbi, Menahem Mendel of Kotzk, once visited his little home town where he grew up. While he was there he made a point of seeing his first, early childhood teacher who had taught him the *alef-beis,* whom he loved very much*.*

Before he returned home, he happened to run into another teacher of his. “I see that you visit your preschool teacher, but you don’t visit me? What have I done to offend you?” asked the teacher.

“You taught me things that can be refuted,” replied the Kotzker, “because according to one interpretation they can mean this, and according to another they can mean that. But my first teacher taught me things which cannot be refuted, and so they have remained with me; that is why I owe him special reverence.”

We tend to live in the maps of our minds and take for granted the direct perception represented by ע *ayin;* the mind tends to dwell upon that which it *does not know for sure.*

That’s because it is the job of the mind to figure out, to conjecture, to approximate, to guess; that is how we are able to navigate life and make decisions. But this useful tendency often becomes a compulsive habit, usurping awareness away from *what we actually do know.*

Eventually, we can come to give no attention at all to what we do know, and instead invest our guesses, conjectures and approximations with a reality they don’t really possess; this is called “living in one’s head.” Nowadays, people often feel most strongly and defend most passionately (and attack most violently in defense of) things they *don’t really know for sure.*

What is it that we *do* know for sure?

Turn your attention from involvement with your thoughts and “see” what is actually happening, right now. This is the path of ע *ayin* – simply noticing and therefore *knowing* what is actually present in your experience.

When you do, there may be a feeling of disorientation or fear.

What if thoughts are just thoughts? What will happen if you let go of all that mind generated drama and attend to what is present, to what you actually know for sure?

The ego is uncomfortable with this, because ego is the sense of identity that is built out of our thoughts and feelings. Let go of your thoughts and feelings, and the ego can feel threatened.

 הָלַ֣ךְ חֲשֵׁכִ֗ים וְאֵ֥ין נֹ֙גַהּ֙ ל֔וֹ יִבְטַח֙ בְּשֵׁ֣ם יְהוָ֔ה וְיִשָּׁעֵ֖ן בֵּאלֹהָֽיו

*Though one walks in darkness and has no glow, let them trust in the Name of the Divine, and rely on their Divinity…*

- Isaiah 50:10

The *haftora* hints that there is an aspect of our consciousness that is forever in a state of not-knowing: *ayn nogah lo – has no glow.* It doesn’t say that one has no “light” but rather one doesn’t even have any “glow” at all. One absolutely *halakh hasheikhim – walks in darkness.*

But if we can be totally clear about not being clear, if we can truly understand and know on the deepest level that all of our mind’s judgments are guesses and approximations, then we also transcend the ego; we transcend our separate self-sense that thrives on belief in our own thoughts and denial of the darkness.

Then, in that surrender to not-knowing, a new way of being emerges:

יִבְטַח֙ בְּשֵׁ֣ם יְהוָ֔ה וְיִשָּׁעֵ֖ן בֵּאלֹהָֽיו *Yivtakh b’shem Hashem v’yisha’ein Elohav – trust in the Name of the Divine and rely on Divinity…*

That is the letting go – the letting of Mystery be Mystery.

Then, we can realize: there *is* something we can know, if we would only turn toward It: *we are consciousness*, we are the ע *ayin*, the awareness that is aware of however this moment presents itself, Now.