

PARASHAS EIKEV

No Easy Matter

In ancient times, many of the more enlightened Romans were fascinated by the purity, spirituality and truth of Judaism - but very few of them actually converted. The burden of the Torah - submission to divine authority, circumcision, Sabbath and festival observance, dietary laws, ritual purity - was simply too heavy to bear. In our own times as well, many secular Jews feel drawn to traditional observance, but only a limited number of them can bring themselves to make the commitment. Without question, keeping the Torah is no easy matter.

And yet, in this week's Torah portion, we find an amazing statement. In summing up the demands of the Torah, Moses declares, "And now, O Israel, what does G-d your Lord ask of you but to fear G-d your Lord, to walk in all His ways, and to love Him, and to serve G-d your Lord with all your heart and all your soul?" So what is Hashem asking of us already? Not much, Moses tells the Jewish people. Only to fear Him. Only to walk in all his ways and love Him. Only to serve Him with all our hearts and souls. That's all.

That's all? Is this such an easy thing?

The commentators explain that the Hebrew word *yirah*, fear, is closely related to the word *re'iyah*, seeing. The key to fear is clear vision. If we see the Creator in the world around us, if we recognize His Presence, we will inevitably be seized by an overwhelming awe of His greatness and goodness. All Moses asked was that we open our eyes and look. The rest would take care of itself.

But how do we develop this clear vision? How do we penetrate the veil of concealment that separates us from our Creator? This in itself is surely no easy matter.

Our Sages find an allusion in this verse to the daily requirement of making one hundred blessings. Nothing may be taken for granted. On special occasions, we are inspired to make the blessing of Shehechianu, thanking Hashem for giving us the life and the sustenance to enjoy this wonderful experience. We can relate to the wonder of these rare occasions. If a sunrise occurred only once every twenty years, we would rise before dawn to watch the spectacle with bated breath, and we would be humbled by the awesome Presence of the Creator. But a sunrise occurs every day, and we have learned to take it in stride.

The same is true of the countless miracles of daily living. If they were not so familiar, we would gasp at them in wonder. We would be exhilarated as we wrap ourselves in warm clothing. We would be intoxicated by the smell and taste of a fresh cup of coffee. We would be astounded at the ability of the body to excrete its waste products and cleanse itself. Yet we take all these things for granted. But if we make the hundred blessings, if we take the time to acknowledge the divine benevolence inherent in all the minute details of existence, we would maintain a perpetual sense of awe and wonder. This is what Hashem wants of us, that we open our eyes and truly see the wonders of His creation, so that this clarity of vision will translate into a sense of the awesomeness of Heaven.

However, as a great sage once commented, heaven is closer to earth than the heart is to the mind. A purely intellectual awareness of Hashem, expressed by lip service in the form of a hundred daily blessings, is simply not enough to inspire true fear of Heaven. The knowledge cannot be detached from the person. We must “lift up our eyes and see who created all these,” in the words of the prophet Isaiah. We must transcend our materialistic view of the wonders of the world and see them as an expression of an infinite spirituality of which we our souls are an integral part. We must involve our hearts and souls in this awareness of the omnipresence of the Creator, and thereby transform ourselves.

A famous Greek philosopher's disciples discovered him eating flesh ripped from a live animal, and their disgust registered on his face.

“How can I philosopher do such a thing?” they asked.

“Right now I am not a philosopher,” he replied. “I’m just a hungry man. When we meet later, I shall be a philosopher once again.”

We all have the ability to transform our own lives, as long as we integrate our awareness of the Creator into our identities. When our blessing and expressions of gratitude emanate from such an awareness, we will undoubtedly find that all these difficult things Hashem asks of us are, indeed, an easy matter.