

PARASHAS EIKEV

Everlasting Blessings

As Moses gets ready to hand over the reigns of Jewish leadership, he admonishes the people not to become complacent. He reminds them of the rebelliousness of the Jewish people in the wilderness, how they constructed a golden calf even as Hashem prepared to give them the Torah. In particular, he singles out his brother Aaron, as the object of Hashem's wrath for his involvement in this unfortunate incident. As retribution, Aaron's children died.

The commentators wonder why Aaron deserved such a severe punishment. Furthermore, we know that Hashem always deals out retribution measure for measure. In what way was the death of his children measure for measure for the sin of idolatry?

Let us consider for a moment the almost universal desire among people to have children. Children are a very difficult and expensive enterprise. They can virtually exhaust all our physical and emotional resources until they reach the point where they can function independently. They take so much from us, and they give back so little in return. True, they give us love and companionship and are our security for our old age, but is this the entire answer? Surely, it is possible to find other ways to give and receive love. Moreover, if all the money spent on children were invested, the result would be an astronomical retirement fund that would provide for a very luxurious old age.

The answer goes much deeper. We are all physical creatures, but our souls are immortal. Therefore, we are not content with passing through this world and leaving it as if we had never been there. We have a natural urge to make our own indelible mark, to immortalize ourselves and achieve eternal existence even in this temporal world. Children give us this opportunity. When we leave behind us children and grandchildren, we know that the world will forever be affected, at least in some small way, by our erstwhile presence in it.

The sin of idolatry, as manifested by the golden calf, effected a profound change in the Jewish people. Encamped at Mount Sinai, they were exalted spiritual creatures akin to angels, and in one fell swoop, they became lowly creatures of pure physicality. They had betrayed their immortal souls, and therefore, a fitting retribution was to remove the everlasting blessing of children.

A very talented woman decided to pursue a business career, and before long, she was moving up the corporate ladder very rapidly. Nonetheless, she wanted to very much to marry and have children, and she was prepared to forgo certain career advancements in order to satisfy her desire to be a mother.

Unexpectedly, a merger upset the company's executive structure, and the new board offered her the job of chief executive officer. It was an opportunity of a lifetime for the young woman, and she was sought the advice of a great sage to help her deal with her dilemma.

"Should I think about having children at this point in my life?" she asked. "I cannot see how I can be a mother and a CEO at the same time. Should I sacrifice my career? Or should I wait a while to have children?"

The sage nodded gravely. "It must be very difficult for you indeed," he said. "I can well imagine how excited you must be at the prospect of running a major corporation, but it is all fleeting, an ego trip. Children, however, will give you permanence. Through them you will exist for all eternity. Don't risk losing your eternity. That is my advice."

In our own lives, we would do well to recognize this inner compulsion to leave our mark in this world. Having children is indeed the most popular expression of this urge, but there are others as well. The prophet assures the childless not to consider themselves "withered wood." For as long as they observe the Sabbath and hold fast Hashem's covenant, Hashem promises, "And I will give them an honorable place in my House within My ramparts far better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will never be obliterated." If we focus on the spiritual side of life, if we devote ourselves to its eternal values, we can be sure that our blessings will indeed be everlasting.