

PARASHAS EIKEV

A Simple Thing

Ask most people if keeping the Torah is a simple thing or a hard thing, and just about all of them would say it is hard. Not that it isn't supremely rewarding. Not that it isn't absolutely wonderful and exhilarating. Not that they would ever dream of having it any other way. But simple it isn't.

And yet, in this week's Torah portion, Moses tells the Jewish people, "And now, O Israel, what does God your Lord expect of you other than to fear . . ., to walk in all His ways, to love Him and to serve . . . with all your heart and all your being?" What a question! Moses starts off as if he is asking for something simple. "What does He expect of you other than . . .," he says. But then he follows with a long list of demands that holds the Jewish people to the highest standards of religious dedication. How do we explain this seeming anomaly?

The commentators explain that the long journey to the Almighty starts with the feeling of fear. When a person contemplates the awesome majesty of the Divine with complete honesty and sincerity, he will inevitably gain an entirely new perspective on life and the world around him. He will feel dwarfed and insignificant, and he will be overcome by an intense inner trembling in his soul. In Hebrew, the word for fear is cognate with the word for sight. When a person fears the Almighty, he begins to see clearly that in order to imbue his life with genuine meaning he must enfold himself in the divine embrace and become one with the Eternal. All the rest will follow naturally until his journey is successfully completed.

A young prince once lost his senses and became convinced he was a rooster. He took off his clothing and sat underneath the table and refused to eat anything other than chicken feed. The king called summoned his finest doctors to the palace, but none of them could cure the prince of his strange obsession. The king was beside himself. Every day, he was forced to observe the heir to his throne sitting under unclothed a table squawking like a rooster. What was he to do?

One day, a sage appeared in the palace and asked the king to let him attempt to cure the young prince. The king agreed.

The sage took off his clothing, climbed under the table and sat down across from the prince.

"Why are you here?" said the prince. "Can't you see I'm a rooster?"

"Well, so am I," said the sage. "I'm a rooster, too."

“Oh,” said the prince, and he fell silent.

Presently, the sage began to eat some ordinary food.

“What are you doing?” said the prince. “I thought you were a rooster!”

“Oh, but I am,” said the sage.

“Then why are you eating human food?”

“Why not?” said the sage. “I can eat any food I like. Just because I’m eating human food, I can’t be a rooster? Why not? Here, have some.”

The prince looked at the sage doubtfully. Then he nodded and took some of the proffered food.

“You see?” said the sage. “We ate human food, and we’re still roosters. It’s no big deal.”

The next day, the sage put on some clothing.

“What are you doing?” said the prince. “Roosters don’t wear clothes!”

“And why not? If I want to wear clothing, I’ll wear clothing. Roosters can do whatever they like. Here, why don’t you put this on?”

Little by little, the sage cajoled the prince to abandon his roosterly behavior and act like a human being. One day, at long last, the prince emerged from under the table, and he was cured.

In our own lives, we sometimes find ourselves running around in circles, focusing on the trivial and unimportant things that take up so much of our attention and losing sight of the greater goals and aspirations of the human condition. How do we break out of this vicious cycle? How do we get control of our lives on so many fronts? Only by opening our eyes to the awesome majesty and omnipotence of the Almighty. All the rest will follow.