

PARASHAS EIKEV

A Father's Love

The sadness still lingers in our hearts. Just days ago, we fasted and grieved over the destruction of Jerusalem. We read the lurid accounts in the Book of Lamentations, and we shed a tear over our ancestors who suffered so terribly in ancient times. And then our thoughts turned to our own situation, still mired in exile and divine disfavor, still surrounded on all sides by foes and detractors who seek our downfall.

But the time for grieving has passed, and now it is time to be consoled. The seven weeks between Tishah b'Av and Rosh Hashanah are known as the Weeks of Consolation. For the Haftorah during this period, we read passages of solace and hope from the Book of Isaiah, whose glowing prophecies paint a picture of the pure joy, thanksgiving and music we will experience when this exile comes to an end.

These inspirational messages are meant to lift our spirits, but this is easier said than done. How can we nurture hope in our hearts when we have to endure so much suffering? How can we relate to a serene and blissful future when we see our people attacked, persecuted and vilified all over the world? How can we fortify our faith in the Almighty when He presents us with so many challenges?

The answer to these troubling questions lies in this week's Torah portion. Moses tells the Jewish people that the Almighty chastises them "just as father chastises his son." This is the key to dealing effectively with life's challenges. As long as we remember that the Almighty loves us like a father loves his children, we can be confident that everything that takes place is for the greater good. A father would never allow gratuitous harm befall his son.

A man from a big city took his family for a long visit with a brother that lived on a farm. Early one morning, the man's young son went out to the fields and saw his uncle plowing.

"I don't understand, uncle," he said. "Why are you ripping apart this beautiful field? It was so pretty, and now it's full of long ditches."

The farmer smiled indulgently at his little nephew and continued to plow. "Just wait a little while," he said, "and you will understand."

The farmer stripped the kernels from a sheaf of golden wheat stalks until he had a little mound. Then he took a handful of the kernels and began to walk alongside the furrows, dropping them in as he went along.

“Why are you ruining those beautiful stalks?” the boy protested. “Why are you tossing those kernels into the ground?”

Time passed, and fresh stalks grew from the ground. “Watch closely,” said the farmer. He cut down the stalks and ground them into flour. Then he made the flour into dough, which he formed into loaves. He put the loaves into the oven, and soon, the kitchen was filled with the savory smell of fresh bread baking.

“Now do you understand why I tore up the field?” the farmer said to his nephew. “It is called plowing; there can be no bread without it.”

In our own lives, we often see that seemingly catastrophic downturns and reversals can actually lead to great results. We may lose a well-paying job and be devastated by our misfortune; we may even reproach Hashem. But a short time later, we find another job far better and more lucrative than the first. So what do we think? Do we recognize Hashem’s guiding hand, or do we chalk it up to sheer good luck? It all depends on our perspective. If we live with the knowledge that Hashem is our loving Father, we can see His kindness all around us. If we widen the lens of our perception and observe the broader landscape of life, we will see Hashem’s loving fatherly embrace all around us. And we will discover within ourselves the strength to survive and even grow spiritually during the long dark night of our exile.