

## The Grandness of Small Things (Edited Transcript)

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So much wisdom can be contained in a single Hebrew word. Our Sages refer to the Hebrew language as lashon hakodesh, the holy language, as it contains layers and layers of meaning.

There is one word which contains many different concepts and layers of meaning. It's the name of this week's portion, Eikev. It begins in Devarim (7:12), 'Vehaya eikev tishmeun - If you will listen and obey these commandments and observe them and do them, that the Lord your G-d has given you and has sworn unto your fathers?. Then we are told that if we fulfill G-d's commandments we will be greatly rewarded.

The Talmud tells us that the main reward for mitzvot, the commandments of G-d that we fulfill, is received in the next world. The concept of reward and punishment is one of the 13 principles of faith because it's about the fact that there is accountability. Good deeds are rewarded by G-d and bad deeds are punished by Him. The Talmud discusses where these rewards and punishments are carried out ? in this world or the next after a person passes on? And the Talmud concludes that the main reward is not in this world but rather in the next.

### The importance of small things

The word eikev means 'if?', but it's an unusual meaning because normally when the Torah wants to say 'if?' it uses the Hebrew word Im spelt aleph, mem. For example, in the second paragraph of the Shema in this week's portion, 'vehaya im shamo'a - If you will listen?. The literal translation of the word eikev means heel. It is used when Rashi refers to those commandments that people perceive to be less important than others. Im ha'mitzvot hakalot - the light commandments that a person would walk on with their heel. The name Jacob in Hebrew is Ya'akov which alludes to his having held Eisav's heel at their birth.

The Baal HaTurim, one of the great commentators of the Middle Ages, cites from the Midrash Tanhuma that the numerical value of the word eikev is 172. The ayin is 70, the kuf is 100 and the bet is 2. He says there are 172 words in the Ten Commandments. The Baal HaTurim gives a hint but then we have to work out the answer and try and develop the idea ourselves. So what's the connection? The Ten Commandments, or more accurately the Ten Statements because they were actually Ten Statements given at Mount Sinai, have more than ten different instructions within each. The correct Hebrew expression for the Ten Commandments is Aseret HaDibrot - The Ten Statements. But they are conventionally known as the Ten Commandments, so I am going to refer to them as the Ten Commandments, even though that's not strictly accurate.

The Ten Commandments have a special place in people's consciousness because these were the commandments that G-d Himself spoke at Mount Sinai. The Ten Commandments were given with great fanfare as G-d's Voice was heard. The Torah describes it as the revelation - there was lightning and thunder and the sound of a shofar and great drama that was symbolic of the whole revelation and the handing over of the Torah from G-d to the Jewish people. And The Ten Commandments give rise to ten different categories into which all of the 613 commandments can fit.

By combining the Rashi with the Baal Haturim, the message is that this word eikev refers to those commandments that one stands on with one's heel. And it's coming to say those eikev, those commandments of the heel that people regard to be unimportant are, in fact, equally important in G-d's Eyes as the Ten Commandments.

### The detail of 172

The Mishna in Pirkei Avot says that one must be as careful with a light commandment as you would with a heavy one, in other

words with one which appears to be less important because, we are told we don't know the reward that G-d attaches to things. There is the phrase, don't sweat the small stuff. And there is room for such a philosophy when it comes to certain issues in life. But when it comes to G-d's Commandments then one must sweat the small stuff. Halacha, Jewish Law, is made up of very fine detail and we are very concerned about details. So much so that the moment before the ball of the sun disappears behind the horizon or what we call in Halacha shekiya, it's not Shabbas. And the moment after it is. The difference between the two is a minute or less. We cannot ignore the details because we achieve greatness through our humble respect for those details.

There is also an idea that within the Ten Commandments there are lots of eikev, small fine details which a person needs to focus on. We have the large commandments such as honour your father and your mother; keep Shabbos; do not covet. Yet these major principles are given effect to through our observation of the finer details of the laws. And it's in those finer details that a person can often slip because it's not good enough to be committed to a broad, general principle. Within honouring your parents there are many directions of detail. Therefore, there is eikev, tiny commandments and details built into the majors. So that's why eikev, 172, is interchangeable with the Ten Commandments that have 172 words built in.

### **Rewarding the humble**

The attention to small things reveals not only care and concern and integrity but also humility. It's all about integrity because integrity is the difference between saying: it doesn't matter whether it's a big or small matter ? integrity demands that I give it equal attention. To be dishonest with one cent, in principle, is no different from being dishonest with a million rand. Integrity is not a question of degrees. When Moshe's father-in-law, Yitro, advised him to set up a system of courts, Yitro suggested that the big matters be brought to Moshe and that the other judges will do the smaller ones. After consulting with G-d, Moshe's answer was that it's a good idea, but that the easier matters would be dealt with by the lower courts and the more difficult brought to him. So attention to details is about integrity.

It's also about humility. The Baal HaTurim says the heel represents the concept of humility because the heel is at the back of the foot and doesn't try to push itself forward. It's not arrogant. He adds that it is less vulnerable than the front of the foot where most injuries to the foot take place. If a person stubs their toe, the pain is felt on the front part of the foot. The heel is sheltered and protected at the back. So, too, he says that a person of humility is sheltered and protected. There is a principle in the Talmud that when one chases after kavod ? honour ? honour runs always from them. And it's almost a law that G-d has built into creation that a person who is in an arrogant pursuit of recognition from others is certain not to get it. Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yosef Yehudah Leib Bloch, explains this on a psychological level : when you demand something, as if you are entitled to it, from a person which they regard as a bonus and not something which you are entitled to, such as honour and recognition, the natural human reaction you are met with is withdrawal and refusal. The more humble a person is, the more that recognition will come and the less chance that a person will be exposed to attack and to abuse and to not receiving the recognition they may deserve.

Moshe is described in the Torah as the anav mikol adam - the most humble of all people. That was his defining quality because it's the essence of what greatness requires. The Rambam says, based on sources in the Talmud that the general path in life to follow is the middle path of balance, not going to one extreme or the other. But one of the exceptions of this is humility ? a person should be extremely humble.

### **The definition of humility**

Eikev contains these two inter-connected ideas ? care for fine details and the concept of humility. Humility is about caring for the details because a truly humble person is not interested in recognition and, therefore, the question is not how big is the commandment or the deed, and how great is the recognition, but rather whether it's right or wrong and to pursue it. This was the essence Moshe's humility seen in last week's parsha. It describes how Moshe set up six cities of refuge for people who had killed another unintentionally, although with some measure of negligence, as their punishment and atonement. Three cities were on the east side of the Jordan River and three were on the west side. Moshe was involved in the conquering of the territory on the east side of the Jordan River but he died before the people crossed the Jordan River onto the west side where the conquests of Joshua began. The Torah tells us that the Jewish people controlled the east side of the Jordan River where Moshe set up three cities of refuge even

though he couldn't set up the other three on the west side, which the Talmud in Makkot points out was unexpected because the cities of refuge were only operational when all six were ready. Meaning: when Moshe set up those three they weren't operational and weren't receiving people yet because the law was they would only become operational when all six were ready and the other three on the west side were not as they hadn't yet crossed the Jordan River. Moshe knew that he was not going to be the one to cross the river, conquer the territory and set up the cities of refuge. The Talmud notes how remarkable it is that Moshe sets up the three cities of refuge on the east side of the Jordan River knowing full well that they would never be operational in his life.

Why did he do that? The Talmud says because he loved G-d's Commandments. He showed us his great passion and he wanted to do good even if he couldn't finish the job. This shows us his humility; Moshe set up the three cities not to get the reward for doing so, but simply because it was the right thing to do. That is the ultimate humility.

The word eikev is about caring about the small commandments and about humility. Humility is the integrity of not being interested in recognition and fanfare, or in large issues like the Ten Commandments alone, because in the world of integrity and humility the size of the project makes no difference. It is the right thing to do, therefore, we do it. That is what we learn from Moshe. And that's why Moshe's greatest moment, says Telz Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Elya Meir Bloch, was when he broke the tablets of stone after he came down from Mount Sinai to find the people worshipping the golden calf. He did so because he felt that the people worshipping an idol within weeks of receiving the Torah made them unfit for it, even though that was his whole mission.

Even after leading the people out of Egypt and through the desert, he was prepared to sacrifice it all because it was the right thing to do. At that moment he was showing that everything he did was for the sake of the cause, not for the sake of himself, or for the recognition, or for what it would do to his reputation. The fact that he would be considered a failure, so to speak, because the people had worshipped idols and had not merited to receive the Torah didn't bother him. In the end G-d forgave the people and everything was put right through the process of repentance and prayer. But Moshe was prepared to let that all go, including his reputation, for all of eternity because he wanted to do the right thing.

### **A powerful ending**

That's why, although in a sense it's a sad ending, it is a very powerful ending that Moshe himself doesn't enter or lead the people into the Promised Land. The fact that he only set up those three cities and couldn't do the other three on the west side is part of the symbolism of his never having crossed into the Promised Land. His mission was to take the people out of Egypt, teach them Torah, be there at the time of the revelation and be the conduit through which G-d would pass the detailed contents of the Torah over to the people and then to lead the people into the Land of Israel. Because of a variety of factors he did not merit to enter the Land of Israel. But Moshe was not about the honour and the glory of finishing big projects; he was about the humility and integrity of doing absolutely the right thing.

That is our lesson for life. We do the small things, the big things, the half things, the complete things ? we just do what we have to because it's the right thing to do. As Rav Eliyahu Dessler once said, we are born in the middle of things, and we die in the middle of things. That is the nature of the human being. Life's not neat. We don't always finish things. We just have to do our best and work as hard as we possibly can to do the right thing, to fulfill G-d's Will, to live with integrity, honesty and commitment to that which is upright and that which is good and to strive to be unconcerned about the recognition and the honour we receive for it. Only when we fulfill G-d's Commandments and especially those that people regard to be unimportant will we have truly achieved the greatness that G-d knows we are capable of.