



## PARASHAT EKEV



### המבחן האמוני Test of Faith

#### ■ The Real Test

The Torah portion of Ekev is a continuation of Moshe Rabbeinu's parting speech to Israel before they enter the Promised Land. Inter alia, he explains why the nation was made to suffer and starve until the Manna was dropped from the heavens:

... לְמַעַן עֲנֹתֶךָ לְנִסּוֹתֶךָ לְדַעַת אֶת אֲשֶׁר בְּלִבְבְּךָ הֲתִשְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתַי אִם לֹא.  
*... in order to afflict you and test you,  
to know what is in your heart,  
whether you will keep His commandments or not.* (D'varim 8,2)

This verse raises a very pointed question: Does Hashem really need to test us in order to find out what is in our hearts? Does He not already know whether or not our faith will remain strong even during difficult times?

An entire chapter of King David's Psalms is dedicated to the wonder of Hashem's creation of man. It also highlights the fact that there is no place in the universe where one can hide from G-d:

אָנָּה אֵלֶּךָ מְרוֹחֶךָ, וְאָנָּה מִפְּנֵיךָ אֶבְרַח.  
אִם אֶסַּק שָׁמַיִם שָׁם אַתָּה, וְאֶצִּיעָה שָׂאוֹל הַנֶּדָּה.  
*Where shall I go from Your spirit,  
where shall I flee from Your presence?  
If I ascend up into Heaven, there You are;  
if I make my bed in the depths [She'ol], You are there.*



אָשָׂא כְּנָפֵי שָׁחַר אֲשַׁכְּנָה בְּאַחֲרֵית יָם, גַּם שָׁם יְדָהּ תִּנְחַנְנִי.

*If I take up the wings of the morning [sun],  
or dwell in the end of the sea, there, too,  
Your hand shall lead me.* (Psalms 139,7-8)

Hashem is present both above the heavens and below the depths, as well as at the ends of the east and west (the sea). Nor can one can hide from Him in the darkness:

גַּם חֹשֶׁךְ לֹא יַחֲשִׂיךְ מִמֶּנּוּ וְלַיְלָה כִּיּוֹם יֵאִיר...

*Even the darkness will not provide cover from You,  
and the night will shine like day.* (verse 12)

For Hashem, there is no darkness. Nothing in the world is hidden from Him; everything is as clear to Him as the light of day. Even the depths of our thoughts, and our subconscious deliberations that we ourselves do not know – they are like an open book before G-d. As beautifully expressed by the Prophet Yirmiyahu:

אִם יִסְתֵּר אִישׁ בְּמִסְתָּרִים וְאֲנִי לֹא אֶרְאֶנּוּ נְאֻם ה'...

*Can a man hide himself in secret places where  
I will not see him?* (Jeremiah 23,24)

Why, then, must G-d test a man, or a nation? He already knows perfectly well our potential and that which is in our hearts. What can a test show that He doesn't already know?

Certainly the Divine test is not designed to increase Hashem's knowledge - but rather to have the People of Israel themselves become aware of their spiritual situation. This will help them learn the areas in which they must improve.

Accordingly, when Hashem says that the purpose of a test is *“to know what is in your heart,”* it means that *we* should know what is in our hearts. The sub-conscious should become conscious, to lead our potential strengths to their actualization. We understand *“to know”* as *“to be known;”* that which is unknown should become known.

And what is the purpose of this deepened awareness? It is to prepare our hearts for a deep and genuine connection with Hashem – a bond independent of any outside considerations, free from the influence of transient factors and ulterior benefits or interests. We wish to attain a faith



that stems directly from the recognition of the truth, and forge a bond with the Creator based on His essence as the source of our soul and our hope for eternal life.

The 40 years of wandering in the desert were not only a one-time punishment for the Sin of the Spies, but rather a profound lesson by which to develop *Emunah*, belief in G-d. This was not just torment for the sake of torment, but rather, as the Torah says, “*to test you, to know what is in your heart*” – that *we* should know it.

The great miracles that befell Israel in the desert are the proof that the hardships we suffered were quite purposeful. Who supplied the People of Israel with fresh clothing? Who gave them new shoes? The Torah doesn't overlook these little details, and makes sure to tell us: There was *no need* for new clothing and shoes, because the same clothing and the same shoes miraculously accompanied them for 40 years, without ever wearing out:

שְׂמֹלֶתְךָ לֹא בִלְתָה מֵעֲלִיָּה וְרִגְלֶךָ לֹא בִצְקָה זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה.  
*Your clothes did not wear out, and your feet did not swell,  
all these 40 years...* (D'varim 8,4; see also 29,4)

Just as G-d brought about this miracle, and just as He enabled Moshe to go without food for 40 days on Mt. Sinai, He could easily have brought about a miracle to ease our hunger and thirst. But He did not! These “small” miracles of the shoes and clothing emphasize that He wanted us to feel tortuous hunger and thirst for a purpose: to pass us through the testing grounds of faith.

As we read of the series of events in the desert, from the day of the Exodus until the entry to the Promised Land, we see that Israel's spiritual status gyrated like the ups and downs of the ocean's waves. As the Medrash teaches:

**R. Avahu said: Even though Israel believed in Hashem before they entered Egypt (Sh'mot 4,31), they later reverted to lack of faith, as written: “Our forefathers in Egypt... did not remember Your manifold deeds of kindness” (Psalms 106,7).**

**After they left Egypt and saw G-d's miracles at the Red Sea, and how He brought the evil ones to justice, again “they believed in G-d” (Sh'mot 14,31), in the merit of which the Holy Spirit dwelled upon them and they sang G-d's praise (Psalms 106,12). (Medrash Sh'mot Rabba 23,2)**



That is, first they believed, then they didn't, then they did, etc. When Moshe first appeared on the scene, Israel's faith was strong, despite their enslavement in Egypt. But after Pharaoh came down hard on them and forced them not only to make bricks, but to gather their own straw beforehand, they lost their faith. After the Ten Plagues, they regained their trust in G-d – and lost it again as they arrived at the foreboding Red Sea. Hashem then brought them through dry land in the sea, and their faith was revived once again, expressed by their *Az Yashir* song of praise. And so on and so forth...

Every time a person comes to believe that his faith is strong, a test comes along to show him that he still has more work to do. The same with the Nation of Israel: Each test led to a deepening of their faith, purifying it from foreign, impure thoughts.

In Hebrew, the word *nes*, which usually means “miracle,” is also a tall pole, such as a flagpole. In Parashat Chukat, we read that Israel complained about the lack of bread and water. Hashem then punished them with lethal serpents, and many Israelites died; the nation then repented and asked Moshe to pray for them. He did so, and in accordance with G-d's instructions, he “*made a serpent of brass and placed it atop the pole*” (Bamidbar 21,9) – the *nes*.

Similarly: “*You gave to those who fear You a nes (trial) to be tested to beautify...*” (Psalms 60,6). The Medrash (B'reshit Rabba 55,1) explains that Hashem gave us one *nisayon* (test) after another, and repeatedly uplifted us, to raise us up in the world like a high pole (*nes*) or a streaming pennant (*nes*) on a ship.

Difficult physical conditions clarify and cleanse one's faith, and turn it into something increasingly pure, totally independent of any material benefits. Just as one cannot graduate from one school class to another without a test, so too we cannot climb the ladder of spirituality without a test, a Divine *nisayon*.

### ■ Do Not Try Hashem

On the other hand, it is gravely forbidden for us to test G-d, as the Torah tells us: “*Do not test Hashem your G-d, as you tested Him in Masah*” (D'varim 6,16). Before we discuss the details of what happened in Masah, let us ask: Is it fair that G-d is permitted to test us, while we may not do the same to Him?

The answer is simple: His purpose in testing us, and our purpose in testing Him, are total opposites. The goal when He tests us, as we said, is to prove



that we can do it; He believes in us, and wants us to believe in ourselves as well. But when we test Him, it is because we do *not* totally believe in Him; we expect Him to *prove* His strength to us so that we will believe that He exists and is all-powerful.

An example of a forbidden test is that which occurred in Masah u'Merivah, which was given this strife-ridden name because of:

... רִיב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל נִסְתָּם אֶת ה' לֵאמֹר הֲיֵשׁ ה' בְּקִרְבָּנוּ אִם אֵין.  
... *the quarrel [riv] of Bnei Yisrael and their testing [nasotam]*  
*of G-d, saying, "Is Hashem in our midst or not?"* (Sh'mot 17,7)

It happened shortly after the splitting of the Red Sea, when the Children of Israel were thirsty and demanded: "Water!" They were testing: "If Hashem gives us water, that's a sign that He exists and is leading us. But if we continue to go thirsty, it means He is not in our midst." The People of Israel were essentially saying that the burden of proof of G-d's existence is upon G-d Himself.

On the other hand, when Hashem tests us, it is precisely *because* He believes in us, and in our strengths and potential abilities. Therefore He frequently raises the bar of the hardships He places before us, in order that we try even harder, and thus extract and actualize the best of our potential.

This fundamental concept is taught in the Medrash, which analyzes this verse: "*Hashem will test the righteous, but His soul hates the evil man*" (Psalms 11,5). The Medrash states in the name of R. Yonatan:

A weaver working with low-grade flax who wishes to separate the fibers should not hit it strongly, because the flax could break apart. But when his flax is of high quality, he may strike it repeatedly, because that will improve it.

Similarly, Hashem does not test the wicked people, because it is clear that they won't be able to succeed. Whom does he test? The righteous ones, the *tzaddikim*, as is written, "*Hashem will test the righteous.*" (B'reshit Rabbah 55,2)

### ■ "...Please Test Me"

With this, let us turn to the Talmud (Taanit 9a) and listen in on a dialogue between the young son of Resh Lakish and his great scholarly uncle, R. Yochanan:



R. Yochanan met Resh Lakish's young son, and asked him: "What verse have you been studying?" The boy answered, "*You shall surely tithe*" (D'varim 14,22), and then asked his uncle, "What is the meaning of these words?"

R. Yochanan answered, "Give tithes so that you may be enriched." The boy then asked, "How do you deduce that?"

R. Yochanan replied: "Go test it [for yourself]." The boy thereupon asked: "Is it then permissible to try the Holy One, blessed be He? Is it not written, '*Do not test the Lord*' (D'varim 6,16)?"

R. Yochanan replied: "Thus said R. Oshaia: The case of tithe-giving is an exception [to the ban], as written (Malachi 3,10), '*Bring all the tithes to the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me with this, says the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven and pour for you in abundance...*'"

The boy thereupon exclaimed, "Had I reached this verse [in my Bible studies], I should need neither you nor your teacher R. Oshaia."

Why is the case of tithe-giving exempted from the prohibition of not testing G-d? Why should one be permitted to test G-d in this area? To answer this, let us return to the prototype of the forbidden type of test, in Masah, when Israel wished to see "*if Hashem is in our midst or not*" (Sh'mot 17,7).

As we explained above, this was simply a lack of trust in G-d – precisely the opposite of the test being waged here with the tithes, which stems from full trust in Hashem! As the verse states: "*Try Me with this, says G-d, if I do not open you the windows...*" It does not say, "see if I open or not;" it is clear that G-d will open the windows and bring us blessing! The only obstacle is whether or not we give the tithes. We are therefore challenged to remove that which blocks the blessing, give the tithes, and see that there is no possibility that G-d will not open the windows of heavens for us.

This is like a teacher who gives his students a test to show them how much they know. In introducing the test, he says, "I'm checking you to prove that there is no chance that you don't know the material!"

We now understand that the only situation in which we may "test" Hashem is where we have full trust in Him. Thus, if a person gives tithes with doubts as to the wisdom of such an activity, this will become a test of the forbidden type, for he is basically saying to G-d, "Show me proof that this is a good idea."



## ■ The Test of the Binding of Isaac

Of all the Divine tests written in the Torah, the famous *Akedat Yitzchak*, the Binding of Isaac, stands out clearly. The Torah introduces G-d's command by telling us His purpose straight out: "*G-d tested Avraham*" (B'reshit 22,1). When Avraham Avinu passed the test successfully, an angel from Heaven was sent at the critical moment and instructed him: "*Do not touch the boy... for I now know that you are truly G-d-fearing.*" (verse 12)

The question jumps out at us: Only *now* Hashem knows this?! Was it not previously clear to the all-knowing G-d that Avraham was G-d-fearing?

The answer lies in a true understanding of the word ידעתי, *I knew*, and two other related words. ידעתי comes from the root meaning "to know, to be aware," and from the same root come two other words: להודיע, which means "to inform, to impart knowledge," and ליידע, which is an even stronger form of informing: "to bring others to awareness."

The above is true for modern-day Hebrew, but in Biblical Hebrew, the third form, ליידע, is not used; לדעת, the first form, is used in its place. Thus the words לדעת and ידעתי, etc. can sometimes mean the simple form "to know," and sometimes the more complex "to make one aware."

As an example, let us consider this verse in which G-d uses the word ידעתי, which usually means "I knew," to say the following about Avraham:

כִּי יָדַעְתִּי לְמַעַן אֲשֶׁר יִצְוֶה אֶת בְּנָיו...

*For I have known him,  
that he will command his children  
and his household and they shall keep G-d's way...* (B'reshit 18,19)

G-d is explaining here why He wishes to tell Avraham of His plan to destroy S'dom. The usual translation of ידעתי as "I have known him" is not accurate; the explanation is rather "I have *made known to him* My ways of justice, in order that he will teach them to his household. I will show him the true situation in S'dom - that there are not even ten righteous people there - so that he will be able to teach his descendants G-d's justness and righteousness."

Another example: At the end of the Torah, Hashem says about Moshe,

וְלֹא קָם נָבִיא עוֹד בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּמֹשֶׁה אֲשֶׁר יָדָעוּ ה' פָּנִים אֶל פָּנִים.

*No prophet ever arose in Israel like Moshe,  
whom G-d knew face to face.* (D'varim 34,10)





Again, the explanation is not that Hashem knew him, as in “was acquainted with him,” but rather, “Hashem made him know - imparted the knowledge - of His will and His law, via clear and lucid prophecy, as if it were face to face.”

Similarly, when Moshe asked to be exposed to more of G-d’s essence, he said:

... וְאַתָּה אָמַרְתָּ יְדַעְתִּיךָ בְּשֵׁם יְיָ וְגַם מָצָאתָ חוֹן בְּעֵינַי.

*You said [about me], “I have known you by the Divine Name, and you have also found favor in My eyes.”* (Sh’mot 33,12)

He is saying to G-d: “You said that You *made me aware* of Your Name when You originally told me, ‘*This is My Name forever*’ (Sh’mot 3,15).”

And this is the explanation here as well, in *Akedat Yitzchak*. When Hashem says, “*Now I know* that you are G-d-fearing,” His message is actually this (as the Rambam explains in his *Guide to the Perplexed*, 3,24): “Now I have made the whole world know that you are a G-d-fearing man. With your act of sacrifice, I have imparted your righteousness to the world’s consciousness, and have made it clear why you have received My trust.”

That is, via the test, it became actively clear to the world that which was always known to the One Who knows the secrets of our hearts.

## ■ The Mt. Sinai Stand

Another seemingly incomprehensible type of test that demands our attention took place at Mount Sinai.

Immediately after the intensely powerful presentation of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the Children of Israel responded with fear and trembling. They came to Moshe in hysterics, and said, “*Please speak with us yourself, and we will hear; and have not Hashem talk to us, lest we die*” (Sh’mot 20,16). They wanted Moshe to be the intermediary. Moshe’s response was soothing, yet also somewhat strange. He said, “*Do not be afraid; for Hashem is coming to test you*” (verse 17). What kind of test do we see here?

The situation can be compared to a jumper’s training course. His trainer constantly lifts the bar higher, so as to encourage the jumper to work harder and extract the maximum from his muscles. The level at which he jumps at any given time is not necessarily the best he can do; he keeps jumping higher and higher until he can reach no more. This is his maximum capability, and here the trainer must stop raising the bar.





The Children of Israel at Mount Sinai are standing before the greatest prophetic experience ever - an intense, one-time, Divine revelation. Hashem, their spiritual “trainer,” gradually raises the bar – i.e., the power of the lightning flashes, the intensity of the flames of fire, and the thickness of the fog around the mountain – higher and higher. Whoever strove for a higher level of prophecy had to display great personal courage. Moshe encourages them not to break and not to fear, for this is the only way they will merit to hear more of the Voice of G-d.

But at a certain point in this Divine training session, the nation broke down and said to Moshe, “Enough! We have reached our highest point, and we cannot continue anymore.” The tension and pressure upon them had reached an intolerable level.

Moshe calmed them down. “You’re not going to die,” he told them. “All Hashem wants is to test you, i.e., to give you the opportunity to actualize your maximum abilities. By increasing the outside audio-visual pressure, G-d simply wants to give you the option of setting for yourselves your level of prophecy, each one of you according to his abilities.”

Tests are a normal part of our lives. Every one of us experiences many Divine tests throughout his life, for the purpose of encouraging us to use our abilities to their maximum. Sometimes, we do not pass the test the first time around – but this does not mean that we have failed. We must learn our lessons from the experience, fix that which needs fixing, ensure that we are acting in an ethical and correct manner, and then continue onwards with strong faith in He Who “gives strength to those who are tired.”

