*Par’shat Ekev*: “Not By Bread Alone”

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I fondly remember the Woody Allen character in one of his early movies proclaiming, in a moment of prophecy: “Man does not live by bread alone.  Frequently there must be a beverage.”

The gag is based on a famous line from our parashah for this week, parshat Ekev, where God tells the Israelites, “I took you into the wilderness to teach you that man does not live by bread alone, but that you could live on whatever the Eternal One gives you.”  Which would include a simple diet of manna and spring water, and a life of constantly going around in circles.

The parashah tells us that if, however, we take communal responsibility for our divine covenant, and not simply wait for God to do the work for us, then in fact we *won’t* have to rely on manna and an eternity of wandering.  Instead, we are coming to a land whose description in this ancient text looks very much like the place many of us have visited before, “a land of wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives, and dates.” *Eretz chittah us’orah v’gefen ut’enah v’rimon, eretz zeit shemen ud’vash.*

In other words, a place of *physical prosperity* and *physical promise*.  *Gashmi’ut.* Substantive reality. That perfectly describes today’s State of Israel in the Land of Israel, which is the physical center of the global Jewish community, even for Jews who may feel little or no connection to that physical reality. Or even alienation from it.

In our blessed age of milk and honey and pomegranates, we recognize that we need the physical Israel in all its manifestations, not just the spiritual Israel.  And many of us are proud of it. I count myself among the loving critics of Israel – critics of occupation, critics of annexation, critics of inequity and discrimination in governmental policy and practice - who nonetheless feel tremendous pride when I even think about Israel, much less when I travel there nearly every year.

But, says this parashah, our responsibility is to appreciate the physical Israel and not take it for granted; to continue to do what we must in order to be entitled to it; to remember when we did *not* have it, and when we did not have most of the mechanisms that support both Israel and the modern global Jewish project or its ancient equivalent.

Those who work for the Jewish philanthropic organizations that fund old projects and new around the world, whether they work as professionals or volunteers, know very well that they cannot do their job without material wealth, without *real* milk and honey.  Their work requires money, talent, and physical resources.

Okay, not “bread alone,” but bread nonetheless. Yes, the Rabbis do indeed say that *im eyn Torah eyn kemach*, “without the spiritual sustenance of Torah there is no bread.” And that is probably the moral of our parashah. But, the Rabbis add, *im eyn kemach, eyn Torah.* “Without bread, there is no way to obtain and maintain the spiritual and intellectual enterprise that comprise Jewish religious peoplehood.  Many people these days like to think so, but it’s not true.

What the Torah wants us to think is that we *could* do this work on “bread alone” if we had to, but that it would miss the point of the work itself; that we once thrived not with physical blessings, but with the vision and hope that buttress those blessings. We survived on a heavy dose of *tikvah*, of hope.

This is how we will be able to remain literally and figuratively “in the land”: By appreciating it not as a gift outright (to paraphrase Robert Frost in another context), but as a tool for our real work.

What is that work? To be a decent, moral, holy people, both spiritual and practical, both in the State and Land of Israel and throughout the world, wherever we dare to create Jewish communities according to the terms of our everlasting sacred covenant.