



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

DEVARIM > Eikev

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August 27, 2016

Eikev

Ups and Downs of Life



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Getting married, having children, a fun vacation, a great job – these are the highs of life. A loss of a loved one, a failed endeavor, a broken heart – these are the lows.

Life has many highs, also many lows. How are we to relate to them? Is there a way to see the lows as positive? Or would we be better off only with highs?

A verse in this week’s Torah reading speaks of highs and lows, and while it describes the Holy Land, it could very easily describe us:

The land to which you are crossing in order to inherit it is a land of mountains and valleys ...

Like the Promised Land, we each have our mountains and valleys – our highs and lows. The question is why? The Promised Land is the most idyllic of all places – literally and figuratively, physically and spiritually. Why then is it a land of mountains and valleys? Would not a land of plains be much better suited to agriculture and therefore more ideal?

The mystics use the metaphor of a seal engraved upon a heart to explain the meaning of mountains and valleys. Mountains resemble a down-to-up mentality, the desire to climb higher. Valleys are receptacles made to receive what comes down from on high to the earth. One is about getting higher, the other about digging deeper to open and receive.

This period in time – The Seven Weeks of Comfort, which follow The Three Weeks of Affliction – also reflect the high that follows the low.

A story of a holy Rebbe who was so absorbed in the divine highs of his Torah learning that he did not hear the cries of his baby child who had fallen out of the crib brings all of the above into stark relief.

HOW TO DEAL WITH THE UPS AND DOWNS OF LIFE

1. Rollercoaster Ride (Joke)

“What happened?” asked the hospital visitor to the heavily-bandaged man sitting up in bed.

“Well, I went to an amusement park over the weekend and decided to take a ride on the roller coaster. As we came up to the top of the highest loop, I noticed a little sign by the side of the track. I tried to read it but it was very small and I couldn’t make it out. Before I knew it, the roller coaster went shooting back down to the ground. I was so curious that I decided to go round again, but we went by so quickly that I couldn’t see what the sign said. By now, I was determined to read that sign so I went round a third time. As we reached the top, I stood up in the car to get a better view.”

“And did you manage to see what the sign said this time?” asked the visitor.

“Yes.”

“What did it say?”

“Don’t stand up in the car!”

2. Highs and Lows of Life

Life is a roller coaster. We all have our ups and downs. We rise up to the pinnacle, and may then come tumbling down to the ground. Often times, the signs suggest that we sit down and buckle our seatbelts. But often we don’t. And when we stretch our necks out, we can get hurt.

Getting married, having children, a fun vacation, a great job ... these are the highs of life. A loss of a loved one, a failed endeavor, a broken heart – these are the lows.

Life has many highs, also many lows. How are we to relate to them? Is there a way to see the lows as positive? Or would we be better off only with highs?

3. Parshat Eikev

A verse in this week’s Torah reading, *Parshat Eikev*, speaks of highs and lows, and while it describes the Holy Land, it could very easily describe us:

For the land to which you are coming in order to inherit it is not like the land of Egypt from which you departed, where you planted your seed and watered it ... Rather the land to which you are crossing in order to inherit it is a land of mountains and valleys that can be watered only by the rains of heaven.¹

¹ Deuteronomy 11:10-11.

Like the Promised Land, we each have our mountains and valleys – our highs and lows.

The wording of this verse raises two questions:

- 1) The Promised Land, the Land of Israel, is presented as the ideal. But how is a land of mountains and valleys ideal? Is not a land of plains much better suited to agriculture and therefore more ideal?
- 2) The Hebrew of this verse states, *li'mtar hashamyim*, which we translate as “by the rains of heaven” but it literally means “to the rains of heaven.” Why? Would it not make more grammatical sense to say, *mi'mtar hashamyim*, which would literally mean “from the rains of heaven”? I mean the rains are coming from heaven, not going to heaven, right?

If we look at all this as relating to our lives, the questions become even more pointed:

- 1) Would our personal Promised Land, our personal preference and ideal be a life of ups and downs, mountains and valleys, or a life only of highs without any lows? (Or at least of highs and plateaus?)
- 2) And, would we not prefer to receive rains, blessings, from heaven, rather than sending them up to heaven (however that's done)?

4. Mystical Metaphor

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the Alter Rebbe, explains all this by using an unusual metaphor – that of a seal or stamp.²

This metaphor originates in the Song of Songs, where the wisest of all men, King Solomon, writes:

*Simani k'chosom al libecha – Place me like a seal upon your heart.*³

² See Likkutei Torah, Eikev conclusion, pp. 17c-18b. Ohr Hatorah, Devarim II, pp. 626-631.

³ Shir Hashirim 8:6.

Traditionally, seals containing an image or insignia were used to stamp an emblem into wax, or another pliant material. Seals typically came (and still come) in two forms:

- 1) “debossed,” where the seal creates a depressed/recessed image in the wax or soft clay
- 2) “embossed,” where the opposite is done: the seal creates a raised image in the pliant material

These two types of seals are represented by two of G-d’s natural creations – mountains and valleys. Debossing creates a recessed image – like a valley. Embossing creates a raised image – like a mountain.

Now, in order for the seal to create a recessed image in the wax (or other material) the image in the seal has to be raised, thus creating a debossed pattern which is sunken into the surface of the material. Conversely, an embossed pattern, which is raised against the background, is created by the image being recessed in the seal.

In other words: A raised seal creates a recessed image. A mountain creates a valley. And a recessed seal creates a raised image. A valley creates a mountain.

Imagine a “debossed” seal engraved with an image of a mountain – what happens when it is pressed into soft clay? A mountain appears in stark relief.

Now imagine an “embossed” seal with an image of a mountain protruding out – what happens when it is pressed into soft clay. A valley is imbedded in the clay.

These two types of seals, the mountain and the valley, explains Rabbi Schneur Zalman, represent two different forms of divine revelation and energy:

Mountains embody expressive energy. Valleys reflect receptive energy.

Mountains denote the divine infinite energy, beyond containers. Valleys personify divine finite energy, which enters into containers.

We humans also have two forms of behavior:

Mountains resemble a down-to-up mentality, the desire to climb higher. Valleys are receptacles made to receive what comes down from on high to the earth. One is about getting higher, the other about digging deeper to open and receive.

Mountains express the human effort to reach and climb ever higher. Valleys manifest the human effort to empty ourselves and absorb something greater than ourselves.

5. Embossed Mountains, Engraved Valleys

Using the seal metaphor, Rabbi Schneur Zalman further relates this to our personal lives – how we relate to one another and how we relate to G-d.

Life calls for times of reaching higher (mountains) and times for making a vessel to receive below (valleys).

But, the powerful lesson in all this is that, like a seal, they both inspire and cause one another. The “mountains” on high create valleys below: When G-d rains down his blessings from above, it inspires us to create valleys in which these rains of blessing may be received and contained. When G-d’s “embossed” stamp presses earth, it creates an engraved valley vessel.

Conversely, valleys above create mountains below: When G-d’s “debossed” stamp presses down on earth, it creates mountains that allow us to climb higher.

This is from the perspective of the Creator.

From our perspective, the formula is equally true:

In order to draw down the “mountain” revelation from above we need to create a “valley,” a container below. We need to empty and suspend ourselves with modesty and humility (*bittul*), which in turn creates the container to draw down the “protruded” and “raised” image from above. By becoming a valley you create a mountain.

Conversely, when we behave like a mountain, when we reach and climb upward, we draw down the “valley” type of divine revelation, the one that fits neatly into our containers.

When we create mountains in our lives, reaching higher, we engrave our emblem into G-d, so to speak, and inspire Him to give us even more containers. And when we make containers or valleys, vessels for light, this motivates G-d to rain down even more blessings from on high.

This also explains why the Holy Land requires both mountains and valleys, and why the Torah says “to the rains of heaven,” and not, “from the rains of heaven.” Our actions below are inspiring “to” heaven to rain down upon us infinite blessings. And G-d’s rains from heaven inspire us down below to open ourselves up “to” the rains of heaven.

If the verse would state “from,” it would indicate a one-way top-down relationship, but “to” reminds us that what G-d does to energize and inspire us.

6. A Cry Heard on High (Story)

It was in middle of the night in the home of the Alter Rebbe.

The Alter Rebbe and his son, later to be known as the Mittler Rebbe, were in the midst of deep Torah study. Suddenly, a child’s cry pierced the calm quiet of the night. The Alter Rebbe’s baby grandchild had fallen out of his crib.

The baby’s father, the Mittler Rebbe, was so engrossed in the sacred text that he did not hear the child’s cry. The baby’s grandfather, the Alter Rebbe, was no less engrossed, but he heard and arose from the divine books and went to pick up and comfort the child.

Afterwards, the Alter Rebbe reprimanded his son, “How could you not hear the baby crying?”

The Mittlerer Rebbe had what he thought was a legitimate excuse and explained to his father that he simply hadn't heard – he had been so enraptured in the subject he was studying that he was oblivious to everything else.

The Alter Rebbe refused to accept that excuse. “You should never be so involved in your own spiritual endeavors that you fail to hear the cry of a child,” he told his son.⁴

Many years later, when the seventh Chabad Rebbe repeated this story, he explained that there are children who cry out because of physical discomfort and others whose pain is spiritual. Sometimes, the child himself may not consciously know that he is in pain. We must, however, listen carefully and heed his call. We should never be so involved in our own spiritual refinement that we are insensitive to the cries of others.

It is the goal of Judaism⁵ that even when totally consumed in the greatest devotion, in the highest of the highs, one should still be sensitive even to the lowest of lows; and even when absorbed in the material and physical aspect of the earth below, one should remain connected to the greatest heights.

If all one has is mountains, highs, peaks, one may not be able to hear the cries of a child; if one only has valleys, one has no inspiration. Both are necessary in order to live a fully divine life in the Promised Land, *a land of mountains and valleys...*

Mountains are the all-consuming, all-elevating learning. Valleys are the ability to hear the cry of a child. A holy land that is only mountains, without the sensitivity to hear a child's cry, is not whole; a holy land that only hears the child's cry but does not aim higher will never be able to truly soothe that child's cries.

⁴ The Rebbe related this story, 19 Kislev 5714 (Sichot Kodesh 5714, pp. 123). Igrot Kodesh, vol. 22, pp. 366. Sichas 10 Kislev 5713 (Sichot Kodesh 5713, p. 91). Likkutei Sichot, vol. 3, pp. 802.

⁵ Sichas 10 Kislev 5713 *ibid.*

The Promised Land, the Holy Land, the Land of Israel, is a land of mountains and valleys, intense devotion and deep sensitivity.

This is true for the literal, geographical Holy Land, and this is also true for the holy land that is each and every one of us.

7. Personal Lesson #1: Identify Your Mountains and Valleys

Now to personalize this in actionable terms:

Identify one thing in your life that could benefit from being more elevated. For example: Say your work has flat-lined and bottomed out. It is predictable and boring. It could really benefit from a mountainous element, something to bring it up and lend it texture and excitement. Perhaps a new project? Perhaps a new challenge?

Then, identify one thing in life that could really benefit from the opposite – from being more humble, more sensitive, more accepting, more grounded, more open to receiving like a valley. Mountains cannot receive rain; rain rolls down mountains. But valleys are perfect receptacles for rain, for blessings, for opportunities. For example: You are successful, you have expertise. But is there perhaps some area where that expertise makes you insensitive to those who are less familiar? Can you allow your blessings to flow, to water and irrigate the dry land of others?

The Promised Land is aspiring, dreaming, hoping, reaching, climbing, ascending mountains; the Promised Land is also opening, receiving, and accepting the humbling valleys.

8. Personal Lesson #2: Electrocardiogram

Ups and downs are normal. Moreover, the Holy Land, G-d's epitome of success and balance, is described as a land of ups and downs. Not only are ups and downs normal, ups and downs are the epitome.

To relate this to your personal life, imagine an electrocardiogram, which reads your heart. The worst possible read is a flat line. It means there is no heartbeat; it means there is no life. A healthy electrocardiogram has peaks and valleys, ups and downs, heartbeats that rise in crescendo and settle back down in diminuendo.

When you remember that ups and downs are normal, and anything else – be it a flat line, or all highs, or all lows – is not, then the challenge is how to best navigate the ups and downs? How to maximize the gifts of the ups in the most efficient way? How to utilize the opportunities of the downs in the most efficient way?

9. Personal Lesson #3: Giving & Receiving

At times, your life calls for giving. At other times, your life calls for receiving.

We climb mountains to reach the source of the spring, but in valleys we receive the blessing of water.

When you are up, give. When you are down, open yourself up to receive. The good times, the high times, the up times, are times of sharing and reaching out. The down times, the challenging times, are times of opening up and receiving.

One example of this is money. When you are financially successful, on the up, don't sit back in your penthouse. Rather, reach down as low as possible, be sensitive to the plight of others, and share, inspire and support those in need.

Conversely, when you have financial lows, monetary challenges, instead of feeling down in the dumps and depressed, try to see it as an opportunity to receive, to open yourself up to new possibilities.

Force yourself to ask around, seek out opportunities. Perhaps it is time to really reach for your dreams instead of merely getting by. Turn the canyon into a receptacle for the bountiful rain that will surely come.

This period in time – The Seven Weeks of Comfort, which follow The Three Weeks of Affliction – also reflect the high that follows the low.

10. Grounded Elevator (Conclusion)

Back in the day, elevators had human beings to operate them. The elevator operators had a saying: “This job has ups and down.”

Imagine if an elevator only had ups, or if it only had downs. Imagine an elevator only went one way. If an elevator only went up, you’d never be able to get out of the building. If an elevator only went down, you’d never be able to reach the apex, the top floor, the penthouse.

Ask not: Why do I have lows? Ask: How can my lows bring me to greater heights? Perhaps the lows are so that I can get down to the lobby and get out of the building to enter – or build – another, bigger, better building.

Ask not: How can I always remain up? Ask: When I am up, how can I utilize my heights to help influence the lows which are sure to come? How can I hear the cry of a literal or metaphorical child even when I am so far above the fray?

This mentality and sensitivity will surely lead to the most elevated, and grounded, life imaginable.

Shabbat Shalom!

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