The mission of **Torah Is Geshmack** is to bring out the richness and enjoyment of Torah for everyone, and in doing so bring them closer to Hashem.

פרשת עקב תשפ״ו

Sweating the Small Stuff

Dovid Kopel

The Battle for the Physical World

פרשת עקב begins with a strange word:

> וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֵת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַר ה׳ אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ אֶת הַבְּרִית וְאֶת הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ (דברים ז:יב)

And it shall be, as a consequence of your listening to these laws, guarding them, and performing them.

Rashi famously explains עקב תשמעון as referring to:

> הַמִּצְוֹת הַקַּלּוֹת שֶׁאָדָם דָּשׁ בַּעֲקֵבָיו (רש״י שם)

The seemingly light מצוות *that a person tramples beneath his heels.*

A person naturally pays attention to what appears large. He is moved by the burning mountain, the thunder, the voice of Hashem, and the לוחות descending from שמים. Yet the Torah teaches that the true measure of a person is often found somewhere much lower — in the עקב, the heel. It is found in the small things.

How does he eat? What does he do after he becomes satisfied? How does he understand his success? How does he treat the possessions entrusted to him? Where do his feet carry him?

The matters a person considers too small to demand his attention are often the very places in which his entire identity is revealed.

That is why the word עקב immediately brings us back to יעקב אבינו.

✦

Holding the Heel

יעקב enters the world holding the heel of עשו:

> וְאַחֲרֵי כֵּן יָצָא אָחִיו וְיָדוֹ אֹחֶזֶת בַּעֲקֵב עֵשָׂו וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ יַעֲקֹב וְיִצְחָק בֶּן שִׁשִּׁים שָׁנָה בְּלֶדֶת אֹתָם (בראשית כה:כו)

His hand was grasping the heel of עשו*, and he called his name* יעקב.

עשו emerges first. He appears naturally suited to the physical world. He is an איש שדה, a man of the field. He hunts, conquers, consumes, and masters his surroundings.

יעקב does not abandon that world to him. From the moment of birth, his hand is attached to the very point where עשו meets the earth.

The struggle between them is not simply whether one will inhabit the physical world and the other will reject it. יעקב also works, eats, marries, raises children, tends animals, accumulates wealth, and fights for his future.

The struggle is over how the world will be used.

עשו uses and abuses the physical world for appetite and self. יעקב takes hold of that same world and directs it toward the ברכה.

עשו's relationship with the physical world is revealed most clearly in the sale of the בכורה. He does not merely eat. He sells the spiritual future of the בכורה for bread and lentil stew — for immediate physical satisfaction.

> הִנֵּה אָנֹכִי הוֹלֵךְ לָמוּת וְלָמָּה־זֶּה לִי בְּכֹרָה (בראשית כה:לב)

Behold, I am going to die, so why do I need the birthright?

The physical need is so absolute in his eyes that the spiritual inheritance becomes disposable. If the בכורה stands between him and the meal, the בכורה must go.

The Torah records the result through a sequence of ordinary actions:

> וְיַעֲקֹב נָתַן לְעֵשָׂו לֶחֶם וּנְזִיד עֲדָשִׁים וַיֹּאכַל וַיֵּשְׁתְּ וַיָּקָם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּבֶז עֵשָׂו אֶת הַבְּכֹרָה (בראשית כה:לד)

And he ate and drank, and rose and went; and עשו *despised the* בכורה.

There is no dramatic philosophical declaration. He eats. He drinks. He gets up. He leaves.

Yet those small actions reveal everything. The physical experience becomes an end in itself, and the spiritual future is discarded.

יעקב is the opposite. When he crosses the נחל יבק, חז״ל teach that he returns for פכים קטנים (*small vessels*). He refuses to leave behind even minor possessions. The belongings of צדיקים are precious to them because they are acquired honestly and recognized as gifts entrusted to them by Hashem.

יעקב literally goes back for the small stuff.

And it is precisely there, while returning for the פכים קטנים, that he encounters the שרו של עשו.

The struggle between יעקב and עשו is fought over the smallest pieces of the physical world.

✦

The Body Is Not the Enemy

רבינו בחיי explains that the physical promises throughout the פרשה are not the ultimate reward. They are benefits given to the body in this world so that the person can prepare himself for life in the next world.

The body, food, wealth, land, and physical strength are not ends. They are opportunities.

He further sees within the opening word והיה the same letters as שם הוי״ה in a different order. When the physical life described in the פרשה is used properly, it leads ultimately to closeness with the שכינה.

This is the depth of:

> וְהָיָה עֵקֶב תִּשְׁמְעוּן אֵת הַמִּשְׁפָּטִים הָאֵלֶּה וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם אֹתָם וְשָׁמַר ה׳ אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְךָ אֶת הַבְּרִית וְאֶת הַחֶסֶד אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ (דברים ז:יב)

The שם of Hashem is joined to the heel.

The highest spiritual reality must enter the lowest part of the person. The goal is not to abandon the body, but to ensure that even the עקב listens.

This explains why the language of eating appears so often throughout the פרשה. The Torah even says:

> וְאָכַלְתָּ אֶת כָּל הָעַמִּים אֲשֶׁר ה׳ אֱלֹהֶיךָ נֹתֵן לָךְ לֹא תָחוֹס עֵינְךָ עֲלֵיהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹד אֶת אֱלֹהֵיהֶם כִּי מוֹקֵשׁ הוּא לָךְ (דברים ז:טז)

You shall consume all the nations.

The generation entering ארץ ישראל will not live a detached existence. They will enter the physical world. They will eat, build, fight, plant, harvest, and possess.

But the more deeply they enter the world, the greater the danger that the world will consume them.



What Really Gives Life?

Moshe reminds כלל ישראל of the מן:

> וַיְעַנְּךָ וַיַּרְעִבֶךָ וַיַּאֲכִלְךָ אֶת הַמָּן אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדַעְתָּ וְלֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן הוֹדִיעֲךָ כִּי לֹא עַל הַלֶּחֶם לְבַדּוֹ יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם כִּי עַל כָּל מוֹצָא פִי ה׳ יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם (דברים ח:ג)

He fed you the מן*, which you did not know and which your fathers did not know, in order to teach you that a person does not live by bread alone; rather, a person lives through everything that proceeds from the mouth of Hashem.*

The Torah does not say that bread is irrelevant. It says that man does not live by bread *alone*. Bread is the physical form through which Hashem ordinarily provides life. The mistake is to confuse the כלי (*vessel*) with the source. It is important to add that לחם is used specifically because it requires a great deal of work and preparation; it represents the culmination of the actions of man. This tells an even deeper idea: all the effort that man puts in does not sustain him alone.

Moshe himself embodies this truth. Twice in the פרשה he explicitly says that during his forty days upon the mountain:

> לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַלְתִּי וּמַיִם לֹא שָׁתִיתִי (דברים ט:ט)

I did not eat bread, and I did not drink water.

The third ascent is described as כימים הראשונים, like the earlier days, and the original account in שמות also records that Moshe did not eat bread or drink water.

Moshe lived for forty days upon Torah alone.

The number forty is not merely chronological.

The בעל הטורים notes the connection between ארבעים שנה and וְיָדַעְתָּ עִם לְבָבֶךָ חז״ל teach that בן ארבעים לבינה. The letter מ has the numerical value of forty, and the לב stands in the middle of the body.

Forty is therefore the בחינה (*aspect*) of בינה — the point at which what was received from above becomes understood, absorbed, and held within the לב.

That same pattern echoes throughout Moshe's repeated periods of forty days and forty nights. What כלל ישראל absorbed through forty years in the מדבר, Moshe received in concentrated periods of forty days upon the mountain.

Moshe was not merely empty for forty days. He was full. The תורה of the ראש entered the לב so completely that מוֹצָא פִי ה׳ became his direct sustenance.

Moshe experienced a שובע (*satiety*) that needed no bread.

He demonstrated that bread is not the true source of life. When he stood directly before Hashem and received the תורה, the ordinary garment of physical sustenance was unnecessary.

But כלל ישראל cannot remain upon the mountain.

They must descend into ארץ ישראל and live in a world of bread.

Their task is not to imitate Moshe by refusing to eat. Their task is to eat while remembering what truly gives life.

✦

Eating like עשו or Bentching like יעקב

Only a few פסוקים after לֹא עַל הַלֶּחֶם לְבַדּוֹ, the Torah commands:

> וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבָעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ אֶת ה׳ אֱלֹקיךָ עַל הָאָרֶץ הַטֹּבָה אֲשֶׁר נָתַן לָךְ (דברים ח:י)

You shall eat and become satisfied, and you shall bless Hashem your God for the good land that He gave you.

This is the Torah source for ברכת המזון.

Within the structure of the פרשה, bentching is not an isolated obligation. It is the practical answer to the entire danger of physical life.

Immediately after commanding וְאָכַלְתָּ וְשָׂבָעְתָּ וּבֵרַכְתָּ the Torah warns:

> הִשָּׁמֶר לְךָ פֶּן תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת ה׳ אֱלֹקיךָ לְבִלְתִּי שְׁמֹר מִצְוֹתָיו וּמִשְׁפָּטָיו וְחֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם (דברים ח:יא)

Guard yourself lest you forget Hashem your God.

And then:

> פֶּן תֹּאכַל וְשָׂבָעְתָּ... וְרָם לְבָבֶךָ וְשָׁכַחְתָּ אֶת ה׳ אֱלֹקֶיךָ (דברים ח:יב-יד)

Lest you eat and become satisfied...and your heart become elevated, and you forget Hashem your God.

The same eating can produce two opposite results.

ואכלת ושבעת וברכת

A person eats, becomes satisfied, and recognizes Hashem.

Or:

פן תאכל ושבעת... ורם לבבך ושכחת

A person eats, becomes satisfied, and forgets Hashem.

ברכת המזון stands between satisfaction and forgetfulness.

Before a full stomach becomes arrogance, before a successful harvest becomes self-worship, before physical blessing produces the illusion of independence, the Torah commands a person to recognize the source.

Otherwise he will say:

> וְאָמַרְתָּ בִּלְבָבֶךָ כֹּחִי וְעֹצֶם יָדִי עָשָׂה לִי אֶת הַחַיִל הַזֶּה (דברים ח:יז)

My strength and the power of my hand produced this success for me.

The תיקון is:

> וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת ה׳ אֱלֹקֶיךָ כִּי הוּא הַנֹּתֵן לְךָ כֹּחַ לַעֲשׂוֹת חָיִל לְמַעַן הָקִים אֶת בְּרִיתוֹ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֶיךָ כַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה (דברים ח:יח)

You shall remember Hashem your God, for He is the One Who gives you כח *to achieve success.*

The Torah does not deny that the person worked. It reveals where even the כח to work came from.

עשו sells the בכורה for food and walks away.

יעקב eats and bentches.

✦

It Is All for You

The great principle of the פרשה appears later:

> וְעַתָּה יִשְׂרָאֵל מָה ה׳ אֱלֹקֶיךָ שֹׁאֵל מֵעִמָּךְ... לִשְׁמֹר אֶת מִצְוֹת ה׳ וְאֶת חֻקֹּתָיו אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוְּךָ הַיּוֹם לְטוֹב לָךְ (דברים י:יב-יג)

And now, ישראל, *what does Hashem your God ask of you...to observe the commandments of Hashem and His statutes that I command you today, for your good.*

Hashem needs nothing from us. The entire world already belongs to Him. Our מצוות add nothing to His perfection.

It is all לטוב לך — for you.

The body is for you. The food is for you. The Land is for you. The מצוות are for you.

But "for you" does not mean merely for your comfort. It means for your perfection. Everything is given so that you may become the person you were created to become.

That goal is described at the end of the פרשה:

> כִּי אִם שָׁמֹר תִּשְׁמְרוּן אֶת כָּל הַמִּצְוָה הַזֹּאת אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם לַעֲשֹׂתָהּ לְאַהֲבָה אֶת ה׳ אֱלֹקֵיכֶם לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל דְּרָכָיו וּלְדָבְקָה בּוֹ (דברים יא:כב)

To love Hashem your God, to walk in all His ways, and to cleave to Him.

חז״ל explain that ללכת בדרכיו, walking in Hashem's ways, means embracing His מידות (*character traits*). Just as He is merciful, we must become merciful. Just as He performs חסד, we must become בעלי חסד. Just as He clothes the unclothed, visits the sick, comforts mourners, and cares for the vulnerable, so must we.

The purpose of the מצוות is not only to produce compliant actions. It is to form a refined person. The Torah must transform his מידות until the way he walks through the world reflects the ways of Hashem.

Then the Torah promises:

> וְהוֹרִישׁ ה׳ אֶת כָּל הַגּוֹיִם הָאֵלֶּה מִלִּפְנֵיכֶם וִירִשְׁתֶּם גּוֹיִם גְּדֹלִים וַעֲצֻמִים מִכֶּם (דברים יא:כג)

Hashem will dispossess all these nations from before you.

When will we inherit the Land?

Not when we believe in כֹּחִי וְעֹצֶם יָדִי.

When we walk in the ways of Hashem.

The nation capable of inheriting ארץ ישראל is not the nation that becomes more like עשו. It is the nation that brings the מידות of Hashem into the physical world.

From the ראש to the עקב

The opening פסוק contains three stages:

תִּשְׁמְעוּן... וּשְׁמַרְתֶּם וַעֲשִׂיתֶם

The בעל הטורים connects these three expressions to:

מקרא, משנה, תלמוד

מקרא is the revealed source — the דבר ה׳ as it first enters the world.

משנה gives that source halachic definition and settled form.

תלמוד enters its depth, draws distinctions, reconciles tensions, and extends the original principles into the changing details of life.

Perhaps these correspond to the movement of the אבות.

אברהם is the beginning. He hears the call of Hashem and proclaims His Name. He is the source from which the nation begins, מקרא.

יצחק receives what אברהם began and preserves it. He redigs his father's wells and gives גבול (*boundary*) and permanence to the דרך, and is the form of משנה.

יעקב joins the qualities of אברהם and יצחק and brings them into a complete nation living within the physical world, as תלמוד is אמת.

יעקב is the בחיר שבאבות (*the chosen of the Avos*), the completion of the אבות. He is also the one whose very name is attached to the עקב.

The תורה must move through the whole person:

ראש – לב – עקב

The ראש receives the source.

The לב is the בחינה of מ׳, forty, and בינה, where Torah is internalized and becomes part of the person.

The עקב carries it into action, into movement, and into contact with the earth.

מדרש משלי explains that שלמה begins משלי with the letter מ because wisdom resides in the לב, which is situated in the middle of the body. This is the בחינה of forty and בינה: the Torah first received by the ראש must be developed and absorbed until it fills the inner person.

But even that is not enough.

The truth in the ראש and the refinement of the לב must reach the עקב.

They must reach eating, work, possessions, movement, and all the ordinary points at which the person meets the physical world.

That is where יעקב grasps the heel of עשו.

✦

At the Feet of the חכמים

The משנה in אבות teaches:

> יְהִי בֵיתְךָ בֵּית וַעַד לַחֲכָמִים, וֶהֱוֵי מִתְאַבֵּק בַּעֲפַר רַגְלֵיהֶם, וֶהֱוֵי שׁוֹתֶה בְצָמָא אֶת דִּבְרֵיהֶם (אבות א:ד)

Let your home be a meeting place for the חכמים, *become covered with the dust of their feet, and drink their words thirstily.*

The expression may contain more than the image of a תלמיד seated below his רב. The feet are where the inner person meets the physical world. The ראש may contain תורה, and the לב may absorb it, but the feet reveal the direction in which that תורה carries the person.

The hands produce מעשה ידיים (*the work of one's hands*). They shape the world outside the person. The feet do something different: they move the person himself. They determine his דרך.

That may be why the Torah's description of resemblance to Hashem is:

לָלֶכֶת בְּכָל דְּרָכָיו

Not merely to perform isolated actions, but to *walk* in His ways.

אדם is a מהלך (*one who moves*). The מלאכים are described as עומדים (*standing*), fixed within the מדרגה (*level*) in which they were created. A person can move from one מדרגה to another. His feet allow him to rise, but they also allow him to descend. The עקב is therefore not merely the lowest part of the person. It is the point from which movement becomes possible.

Perhaps this is why we sit at the feet of חכמים. We do not learn only from the תורה expressed through their words. We encounter how that תורה reaches the place of movement — how it enters the ordinary details of life and becomes a דרך.

This may also deepen the repeated washing of feet in the world of the אבות. We see אברהם tells his guests:

> יֻקַּח נָא מְעַט מַיִם וְרַחֲצוּ רַגְלֵיכֶם וְהִשָּׁעֲנוּ תַּחַת הָעֵץ (בראשית יח:ד)

Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet.

The feet touch the earth and gather its dust. Rashi explains that אברהם feared his guests worshipped the dust of their feet. The physical world must be entered, but the dust gathered from it must not become the object of the journey.

יעקב's struggle is therefore fought at the point of movement. He holds the עקב of עשו, returns for the פכים קטנים, and is struck in the place that carries him forward. The battle is not over whether man will enter the physical world, but over the direction in which he will walk through it.

Perhaps sitting at the feet of the חכמים means learning not only what they know, but how they walk — how the תורה of the ראש and the refinement of the לב reach the smallest details beneath the עקב.

✦

The Small Stuff Is the Whole Struggle

The term "small stuff" is misleading. Those details appear small only because we do not recognize what is being decided within them.

When יעקב returned for the פכים קטנים, he was not distracted from the great battle. He was entering it.

He understood that no part of the physical world should simply be surrendered to עשו. Every possession, every meal, every action, and every step can either be abused for self or used in the service of Hashem.

Moshe could live for forty days without bread because he was sustained directly by Torah.

Our עבודה is to bring that Torah into the bread.

To eat and bentch. To succeed and remember. To possess and remain grateful. To walk through the physical world without trampling the small מצוות beneath our heels.

פרשת עקב teaches us to sweat the small stuff because the small stuff is where the struggle between יעקב and עשו is decided.

עשו sells the בכורה for food, consumes the world, and loses the ברכה.

יעקב holds on to the heel, returns for the small vessels, and reveals that even the lowest part of life can become attached to Hashem.

May we merit to recognize that every gift and every מצוה is לטוב לנו, to bring the Torah from our ראש into our לב and all the way down to our עקב, and to walk in the ways of Hashem until every part of the physical world becomes a כלי for ברכה and closeness to the שכינה.

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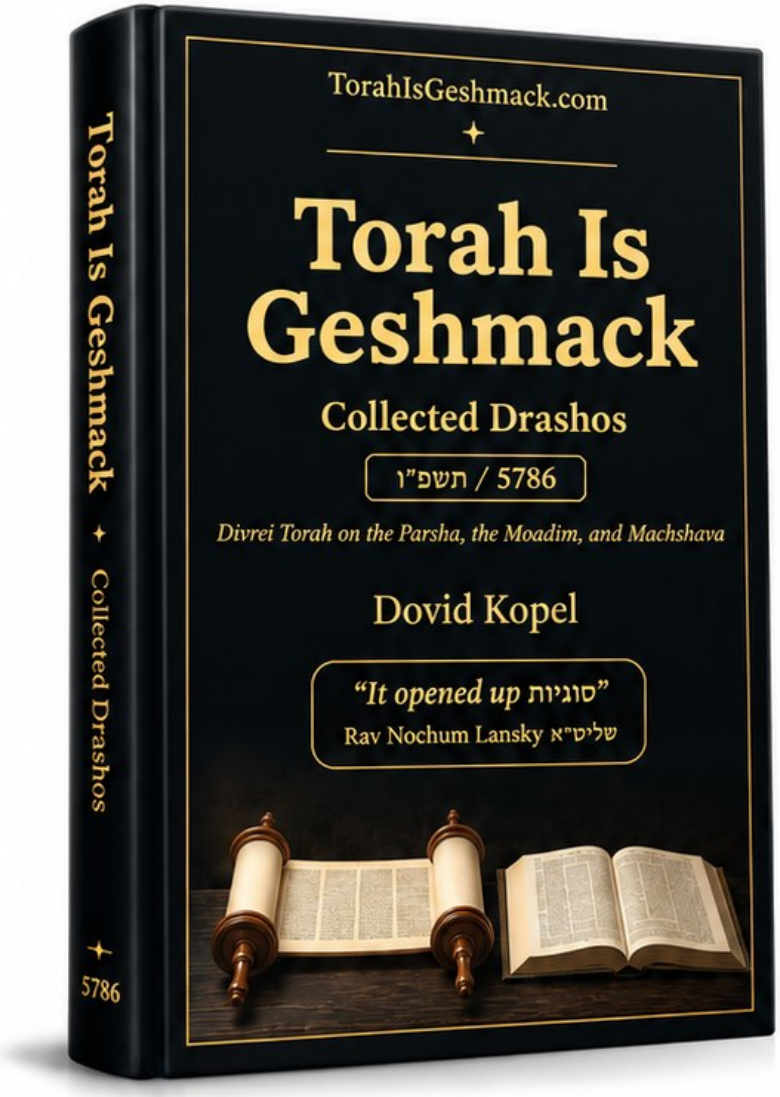
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