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**Show the World What a Jew Looks Like**

*An earnest message to my child as she makes her own way in a broken, angry, anguished world, and a quiet plea to us all to open our hearts with love.*

**August 16, 2025 – *Ekev* 5785**

I cried five times the day we moved Sami into college this week—twice before we stepped onto campus.

The third time was when I bumped into an IKAR member who was coincidentally moving her own kid into the same school, who shared that she, too, hadn’t stopped crying all day. She had just come from a quick Target run where, standing on line before her was a tiny boy, about 6-years-old, with his mother. He was beaming—holding a giant nerf toy in his hands. “I will buy you a nerf toy this year and next year and every year forevermore as long as you promise to never ever get big and leave me,” his mama gushed. “Deal!” he shouted. BIG HUG.

…And big tears… for the other mother, standing just behind.

That other mother, the one moving her kid into school, and I, and so many others roaming campus on move-in day, were dealing with the wondrous but non-uncomplicated blessing of children who may have once promised that they’d never ever get big and leave, but now were, and did.

So we tried (and failed) to hide our tears as we tucked in the XL twin dorm sheets and Kon-Marie’ed the sock drawer, as we set up the new desk lamps and realized we didn’t bring nearly enough hangers. As we worried about how our kids’ room—in the “party” dorm that boasted what David and I noted was a *prison-forward aesthetic*—was uncomfortably close to the boys’ bathroom, and noticed that the windows don’t really open and that the AC (thank God for the AC) power-blasts into exactly the wrong part of the room. And we cried quietly behind big sunglasses as we witnessed our kids bravely introducing themselves to strangers living across the hall… and we prayed to God that this world—this broken, angry, anguished world—would be kind and gentle to our children.

And we wished—I wished, I prayed—that that could be true for *all* children. And wished that as fraught as this was, *every* parent could have the opportunity to cry these kinds of tears.

For David and me, this was not our first rodeo. And it doesn’t really get easier.

So despite the 100 degree heat (which, with the humidity feels like 120), as we approached the airport I still felt deeply tethered and not at all ready to leave one of the people I love most in the world alone in a city I don’t know at all, with streets and trees and landscapes unfamiliar, releasing her to find her own way.

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It's Parashat Ekev, part of Moshe’s long, sometimes meandering farewell speech to the Children of Israel, *b’nai Yisrael*. As I read his words this week, I feel a deep affection… a kind of parental resonance. He, too, faces children who stand at the threshold of the next chapter as they prepare to enter the land without him. He, too, is excited and trepidatious, grateful and sad. His message—a little bit rambling, a little incoherent—reads like a jumble of scrambled, uneven, contradictory emotions:

1. Don’t worry, he says. God will love you and bless you (7:13). You won’t even get sick—bc God will remove from you every illness. AND ALSO: if you’re not careful, you’ll face great danger. Don’t think you’re immune.
2. Here’s another one: In the land, Moshe promises, you’ll lack nothing (8:9). AND that abundance will pose a singular threat to your integrity. Watch out—or you’ll lose yourself completely (8:17).
3. There’s more: Be strong to conquer your demons and enemies (9:1). AND don’t you ever believe that your success comes from your own strength—it is all only from God.
4. Eat, be satisfied, and bless (11:15)! But don’t be haughty. It’s not about you.

It is comforting to me that even Moshe Rabbeinu doesn’t quite know how to hold this daunting, terrifying, wondrous, profound moment—the moment of separation between parent and child, between leader and people. Instead, he says it all, hoping that *b’nai Yisrael* will be able to discern what matters most from the jumble of words: warnings, blessings, and instructions.

I, too, left my kid a far too long, far too earnest letter. And while I could attribute most of my tears on move-in day to the overwhelming sense of pride, joy, appreciation, and excitement for her, the very last cry, at our departure gate, had a slightly different tenor. This time, it was regret. The nagging sense that I had somehow failed to say what my child needed to hear, what mattered most. That the eight-page letter I wrote her was less *profound treatise* and more *desperate word salad*. That I had missed my chance to provide the guidance she’d need to navigate the years ahead, to be properly launched into the world.

Perhaps it was the experience of attempting my own farewell speech to my daughter that compelled me to slow down and read between the lines of Moshe’s somewhat confused prescription. But as I did, I saw a hidden moral message that I pray that both our kids, and we, will take to heart in this devastating, confusing, uncertain time. An urgent message—a prescription for how to live in a pained and complicated world, a clarion call for everyone, and maybe especially for us as Jews.

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Here's what I saw: two conflicting images that demonstrate perhaps the most confounding of contradictions:

*Image one*, from the beginning of the *parasha*: The people are about to enter the land. There they will find enemies intent on destroying them. The instruction is clear:

וְאָכַלְתָּ֣ אֶת־כָּל־הָֽעַמִּ֗ים אֲשֶׁ֨ר ה אֱלֹהֶ֙יךָ֙ נֹתֵ֣ן לָ֔ךְ לֹא־תָחֹ֥ס עֵֽינְךָ֖ עֲלֵיהֶ֑ם

*You shall devour all the peoples that the LORD your God delivers to you, showing them no pity.* (Deut. 7:16)

Here Moshe is a very certain parent, one who knows that his children will face challenge and threat, and is determined in his righteousness to construct a reality in which not only is the enemy defeated, but in which our hearts are sealed to their suffering. Their pain is not our concern—we are on a just and righteous course, we must not be distracted.

לֹא־תָחֹ֥ס עֵֽינְךָ֖ עֲלֵיהֶ֑ם – Show them no pity, from the *shoresh* (the root) “*hus*”—to have compassion. There is no room for compassion in a battle for our survival.

And yet, just a few chapters later, a very different image emerges. Here Moshe instructs:

וַאֲהַבְתֶּ֖ם אֶת־הַגֵּ֑ר כִּֽי־גֵרִ֥ים הֱיִיתֶ֖ם בְּאֶ֥רֶץ מִצְרָֽיִם

*Love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt* (Deut 10:19).

This is one of the 36 times we read in Torah of our obligation not only to protect the stranger, the vulnerable one, but also to *love* them. And this, for the most human reason: because we, too, were once strangers. It is our shared experience of trauma that binds us up in one another. Who better than we to understand the grief, the heartache, the terror of the stranger? This is our eternal responsibility.

Now, how are we to hold the contradiction between these two conflicting images? Is Moshe’s dream that his children enter the land and become “*no regrets, no surrender*” Jews, or that they become “your heart is the heart of the stranger” Jews?

And what happens when this is no longer a hypothetical *mahloket* (dispute), but the very heart of a piercing and urgent rift in our people? When our Jewish family is torn asunder, with the fault line between those who see compassion itself as a form of not only weakness, but betrayal, and those who cannot bear the dehumanization, who insist that the real betrayal is the failure to uphold the dignity, to honor the humanity of the other?

How are we to resolve this dilemma? What is a child to do, who—having entered a new and uncertain landscape, carefully unfolds and reads the letter of her parent, seeking guidance on how best to live?

Here it is Moshe himself who whispers the answer that *b’nai Yisrael* needed, that we too need today. Just before that second image, we read:

וּמַלְתֶּ֕ם אֵ֖ת עׇרְלַ֣ת לְבַבְכֶ֑ם וְעׇ֨רְפְּכֶ֔ם לֹ֥א תַקְשׁ֖וּ עֽוֹד׃

*Cut away the thickening around your hearts, and stiffen your necks no more* (Deut 10:16).

Circumcise your hearts! Enough with this stubbornness!

What does this mean? Rashi and Ibn Ezra explain: אֹטֶם לְבַבְכֶם וְכִסּוּיוֹ: -- This is a call to cut away the barrier, the cover, whatever it is that blocks your heart from feeling. That blocks you from seeing and understanding even the most painful truth. **You think your thick skin is protecting you, but in reality, distancing yourself from another’s humanity will only diminish your own.** Only when you open your heart, when you take a risk, will you be able to truly love, and will you be worthy of love.

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So now I find myself reconsidering my own farewell note/ dissertation, left on my child’s desk, which, perhaps, had carried more truth in its folds than I had imagined. In fact, I realize, Moshe and I may have been trying to offer essentially the same complicated message. Here’s what I wrote, in part:

*Remember that you are not here to defend the policies, rhetoric, or actions of any person, or any state. You must never defend the indefensible.*

*You are, however, here to show the world what a Jew looks like.*

*To do that, you must open your heart. Ask questions. Get uncomfortable. Share from your heart—your love for our people and our tradition, your understanding of our history. Share what Judaism and what Israel means to you and to our family, our people. Your dreams for a future of peace and justice.*

*Speak humbly, and listen deeply. Don’t be afraid to be wrong—that’s called learning. Remember that we can grieve another person or people’s losses and our own at the same time. This is what makes us most human.*

*All of this,* I promised her, *will be far more effective than any counter-protest.*

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In some ways, the deepest message of Moshe’s prolonged farewell to his people—comprising of most of the book of Devarim—is the wistful recognition that he will not be able to accompany *b’nai Yisrael* on their journey, and therefore, he will not be able to protect them. This, perhaps, is the hardest parenting lesson of all.

When I first became a parent, my sister-in-law Paulette said that *having a child is like wearing your heart outside your body. You know that the thing most precious to you is the now precisely what you can’t fully protect.*

Your life, Moshe is saying, your future depends on outcomes I cannot control. As much as I yearn to, I cannot keep you from harm. All I can do is promise you that I love you, and that even when I’m no longer beside you, I’m always right here.

That is a message that I feel deeply at the end of a week of many sweet tears. But I am heartened that Moshe has also modeled what it looks like to leave our kids with a reminder not only of our limitations, but also of *their* agency. *I* can decide, and *you* can decide, to open our hearts. To feel deeply. To love deeply. That is not only what *we* need, it’s what this fragile, anguished, beautiful world needs.

Shabbat shalom.