

Shabbat shalom. Thank you all for being here in the community with me as I was called to the Torah.

I remember when I was preparing to be a bar mitzvah, if I was hungry, my Hebrew teacher, Norman Shore, always made sure he gave me some food. He made sure I did not live by Torah study alone. Thank you, Norman Shore, for providing me food to eat before I studied Torah.

Today's parasha is Ekev. Ekev means "if". For example, if we do this, G-d will do that. "If" is also the name of a well-known poem by Kipling. It ends saying to the son that if he behaves in a certain way, "yours is the earth and everything that's in it, and – which is more – you'll be a man, my son!" But the poem is about behavior from the point of view of a man, while the parasha is about behavior from the point of view of G-d.

From this parasha, I learned different meanings for "stranger" and "mitzvot". I began to consider the question: why do we do mitzvot? Some of my ideas about this parasha are: we should be aware of the wonders of the world; we don't have to be perfect; we should be kind and peaceful to strangers because of what happened to our ancestors; and doing mitzvot -- commandments or good deeds -- affects ourselves and the world.

In this parasha, Moses is telling of the many gifts besides bread, like the food, manna, that G-d gave the children of Israel when we were camping in the desert. It is appropriate that we study this parasha at this shul. The children of Israel are going from the east to the west, preparing to enter Canaan, and on their route they have received manna as food. Some scientists and residents of the Sinai say that manna comes from a little worm that drinks sweet sap from plants in the desert. So the people were traveling from east to west, and manna comes from a worm. We are meeting here at Temple Shalom on East-West Highway and Grubb Road.

My parasha in chapter 8 says we should not live by bread alone, but by everything that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord. Many people think that not living by bread alone means that they live by love, by kindness, by family. Also, the Talmud says that the mitzvah to say blessings after food comes from this parasha. Chapter 8 says, "And thou shalt eat and be satisfied, and bless the Lord". According to tradition, Moses invented the first birkat hammazon, the blessings after food, when he thanked g-d for the manna. There is an old Spanish melody, a blessing after food, that my classmates and I at Hebrew day school in South America sometimes sing. It begins, "bendigamos al altísimo, al Señor que nos crió. demos le agradecimiento por los bienes que nos dió." It means, let us bless the Lord who raised us; let's thank the Lord for the good the Lord gave us.

We should not worry about eating too much today—tradition tells us that on Shabbat, not only do we each get an extra soul, we each get an extra stomach, too, so we can eat more on Shabbat without getting fat. And thank you, Grandmother, for helping plan the food for us today.

I learned in Hebrew day school also about blessings for many different things—like lightning and rainbows. We can be aware of both the universe and our actions in daily life. We can think not only of our own life, but also about the universe.

I like chapter 9 because I think it says you don't have to be perfect to go into the land. We went into the land not because we were good but because the people there were not. Some rabbis think chapter 8 and 9 say G-d corrects us because G-d thinks we're like kids, who are not educated perfectly. G-d does something so that we will do something.

I like the part in the parasha about the stranger. Chapter 10 says we should be kind to strangers because we were strangers in the land of Egypt for 400 years. If we are strangers, maybe we are not perfect, according to some other people. And if we're not perfect according to G-d, we still can go into the land of Canaan. But the Torah gives the idea that everybody should try to be perfect to G-d. As I become an adult, and as we all enter the new year, it would be a relief to know that we don't have to be perfect.

Norman Shore and Rabbi Gerry Serotta explain that the word “ger” or “stranger” may have meant a person from another nation among the people of Israel. I think the people who wrote or first read this parasha maybe had trouble accepting any kind of stranger, or even accepting that they themselves were strangers in the land of Egypt.

Rashi, the teacher from France whose death was nine hundred and one years ago this August, counts the many times in this parasha the word “love” appears. The parasha says G-d loves us, we should love G-d, and we should love the stranger. The parasha uses the Hebrew word “ahava,” “love,” instead of “hesed,” “kindness”. I think in this case loving the stranger means almost the same thing as being kind to the stranger. But I think the parasha says “love” because when you love someone it’s more than being kind. It’s like peace. So we can be peaceful to the stranger.

Boy Scouts teach us to be kind but cautious with strangers. Judaism teaches that a stranger can become a friend, could maybe even be the messiah in disguise.

The parasha compares G-d to a father and says we should be kind to strangers. Its haftarah, in Isaiah, compares G-d to a mother and gives comfort when we ourselves feel like the strangers. The haftarah readings in Isaiah give comfort after Tisha B’Av, recently, remembering the destruction of the temple.

Sometimes I feel like a stranger in Boy Scout camps. We might feel like strangers in a new place or with new people. I remember in Colombia, South America, where I go to Hebrew day school, it was strange and difficult to practice for the bar mitzvah because the rabbis chant differently than here or they don't chant at all. I feel normal in both countries because I have family in both.

Part of chapter 10 begins with a question, "Oh Israel, what does G-d require?" I believe it continues asking if we should follow the mitzvot, the commandments, just for ourselves. The parasha answers that G-d requires us not only to follow the mitzvot for ourselves. It says we should also teach the mitzvot to our children. I like the mitzvah about you have to respect your father, honoring your father and mother: I'm going to teach my kids to follow that mitzvah.

Chapter 10 continues by saying be kind to the strangers. Maybe the "strangers" are those who do not follow all the mitzvot, or people who don't follow mitzvot the way we do. It is a mitzvah for us to be kind to them. We live not by bread only, but also by other blessings. We live not by mitzvot for ourselves only, but also by kindness to those who do not follow the mitzvot.

The sh'ma, mezzuzah, teffilin, and siddur all include part of chapter 11 of this parasha. Part of this section says, "... if you hearken to my commandments to love...G-d and to serve him with all your heart and soul...I will give the rain of your land in its season." That's

also like chapter 7. The siddur, *Kol Haneshama*, says this part of the sh'ma and the mezuzah can mean for us today: what we do affects other people and the world. If we do not behave correctly in the environment, maybe the rain could stop somewhere or sometime because of our actions. The word mitzvot might mean not only "commandments," but also "good deeds". Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote a commentary about this parasha ekev, in which he talks about the beginning of the sh'ma. He says it means there is one planet. If you do this or the other, there's going to be a consequence. Rabbi Rami Shapiro, a commentator on the siddur, *Kol Haneshama*, interprets the beginning of the shema to mean: if we listen, then we will love G-d. Listen, "shema," and as a natural consequence, we love. The Jewish community can help the world by doing mitzvot, but not everybody has to do the same mitzvot. People can do the mitzvot that they think would help other people. Some mitzvot that could help other people involve being kind to strangers.

I wonder why there are wars, why there are people having hunger, people homeless. I wonder -- when we do bad deeds, does G-d punish us? If Israel were perfect, would there be no war there? Rabbi Rueben Levine says that people fight for material things like bread – the bread is like power. What is important is the spirituality. I believe that people can prevent violence and damage, but they just don't do it.

I thank my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, rabbis, friends, including my classmate Jonathan Mikler, who came from South America to be with us today. And I thank all who have taught me the mitzvot, and all who have helped me to reach this

season. *Gracias, Mamà*. And I thank G-d for letting us all be here. Maybe we can help others have the blessings that we enjoy. My father and my grandfather Martin lived in South America because my grandfather was working with students and professors on how to distribute food better. I can help give some food left over today to DC Central Kitchen.

Now, please share your opinions about the parasha Ekev. Don't feel like a stranger. Your thoughts and my thoughts about the parasha don't have to be perfect. Please share your "food for thought," so that we can all benefit. Thank you.