Remembering My Father: Thoughts on Parashat Eikev, August 8, 2009

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The first word of this week's Parasha is "vehaya"--and it will be. The great 18th century Moroccan Jewish sage, Rabbi Hayyim Benattar, notes in his commentary Or ha-Hayyim that this word implies happiness. He would interpret the first verse of the Parasha to mean: if you will be careful in keeping these ordinances [of the Torah] and you will observe and fulfill them--then you will be happy! God will fulfill His covenant and compassion as He promised to your ancestors. In elaborating on this theme, Rabbi Benattar stresses that our observance and study of Torah should be marked by a spirit of joy.

These comments are especially meaningful to me this week, since our family is observing the anniversary of the passing of our father, Victor B. Angel, who died eighteen years ago on Ab 17. My parents, of blessed memory, epitomized the observance of Judaism in a spirit of full-hearted happiness. We were raised to feel that Judaism was a great gift, offering us an optimistic and joyous way of life. God was viewed as a loving, compassionate Parent, not as an angry Power just waiting to punish us for the slightest mistake.

My father was well-known for his kindliness, friendliness and great sense of humor. He always seemed to have a joke, pun or bon mot to cheer everyone up. He was in his best form on Shabbat. My mother, Rachel Angel, always prepared elaborate Shabbat meals. Our Shabbat table was surrounded by family and friends. Invariably my father would crack a joke. Equally as invariably, my mother would respond: "Now Shabbat has officially arrived!" Indeed, Shabbat was such a beautiful day--a genuine day of celebration--I could hardly imagine how anyone would want to live without observing and enjoying Shabbat.

My father was among the first to arrive at synagogue on Shabbat morning. He loved the prayers and didn't want to miss even one minute of the service. He taught us the meaning of Shabbat not through his words, but by his actions. He didn't tell us to come to synagogue-- he brought us to synagogue. He didn't tell us to chant the service along with the Hazzan and congregation-- he did so himself and set the example for us. He didn't tell us to value Shabbat--he demonstrated how much he valued Shabbat, and this enthusiasm was conveyed to us.

The natural, happy observance of Judaism characterized the lives of my parents, grandparents, and much of our extended family. "Serve the Lord with joy" expressed their philosophy.

For my parents, and the civilization of which they were part (the religious Judeo-Spanish Sephardic world), God was best served with a spirit of happiness, love of God and humanity. It is especially important to reclaim this spirit of Judaism today. We need to do so not only for our own sake, but for the sake of our children and grandchildren--and the generations to come.

Angel for Shabbat