The “I”’s Don’t Have It: Thoughts for Parashat Ekev, July 27, 2013

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A famous joke tells of a “conversation” between two people. “A” goes on at great length talking about how wonderful he/she is, elaborating in a very self-centered way on his/her talents, virtues, accomplishments. Finally, though, “A” realizes that the “conversation” is entirely one-sided. Courtesy demands that “B” also be invited to participate if there is to be a dialogue. So “A” tells “B”: “That’s enough talking about ME. Let’s talk about YOU now. What do YOU think about ME?”

I suppose that all of us have come across a number of “A”s during the course of our lifetimes. They see themselves as the center of the universe. They imagine that everyone wants to hear their bragging and egotistical pronouncements. Even when they try to get us into the conversation, it is only because they want us also to be talking about them and glorifying them.

It is painful to have to deal with people with inflated egos, who talk at us rather than with us. These are people who constantly strive to impress us with their genius, or good looks, or cleverness, or wealth etc. Instead of being favorably impressed, though, most of us find such egotists to be nuisances. Or we deem them to have low self-esteem for which they compensate by trying to convince us how wonderful they actually are. The more egotistical they are, the more respect we lose for them.

The great Hasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter of Ger (1847-1905) made a perceptive comment (in his book Sefat Emet) on a phrase in this week’s Torah reading. In recounting his receiving the second tablets of the law—after the first had been shattered in the incident of the golden calf—Moses states that God told him “pesol lekha”—carve out for yourself a new set of tablets of the law. The Sefat Emet notes that these two Hebrew words are spelled in the identical way as the Torah’s phrase prohibiting idolatry: do not make for yourself an idol (lekha pesel).

A lesson is to be derived from the Torah’s word usage. When the “lekha” (the self, the ego) comes last, then the result is the tablets of the law; when the “lekha”

comes first, the result is idolatry. True humility leads to piety and righteousness. Egotism leads to falsity and arrogance.

The Torah teaches humility and authenticity; it teaches quiet reverence and the suppression of egotism. For the Torah, the “I”s don’t have it.

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My wife and I recently spent three wonderful weeks in Jerusalem. With all the noise, tension, and controversy that characterize the dynamism of Israel…we found a tremendous inner calm and spiritual serenity.

The streets of Jerusalem are alive with happy, busy people, full of optimism, love and hope. It is amazing to be part of a society—if only for a few weeks—that is at the cutting edge of modern technology while at the same time steeped in thousands of years of history. It is soul-satisfying and healing to see life in the context of the millennia, to walk through the Old City, to shop in the ultra-modern malls, to study our ancient texts in the city built by King David, and to meet with post-modern scientists and thinkers.

We were in Jerusalem during the “three weeks” of mourning, concluding with Tisha B’Av. Yet we could not help but feel the spirit of consolation that characterizes the 7 weeks between Tisha B’Av and Rosh HaShanah.

This week’s Haftarah concludes with powerful words (Isaiah 51:3): “For the Lord has comforted Zion; He has comforted all her waste places and has made her wilderness like Eden, and her desert like the garden of the Lord; joy and gladness shall be found therein, thanksgiving and the voice of melody.”

Angel for Shabbat