

The Illusion of Reality (Ekev)

“Reality is nothing but a collective hunch.” -- Lily Tomlin

When *The Matrix* was released in 1999, the internet was rapidly entering everyday life, virtual reality was capturing the public imagination, and society was approaching a new millennium with both excitement and anxiety about the growing power of computers. Written and directed by the Wachowskis, the film transformed those concerns into one of the most influential science fiction stories of its generation.

The film imagined that what humanity perceived as reality was actually a sophisticated computer simulation. Most people were physically dormant, connected to machines and collectively experiencing an artificial world. That world nevertheless felt completely real. People could see, hear, touch, smell and taste it. Their experiences were genuine, even though their understanding of what produced those experiences was entirely mistaken.

Only a small minority had escaped the Matrix and discovered the deeper reality concealed behind it. The idea was presented through futuristic technology, but the underlying question was ancient: How much of what we call reality is merely the surface of something deeper that we cannot ordinarily perceive?

In this week’s Torah reading of Ekev, Moses recalls how the Children of Israel were sustained by manna from heaven. The experience was intended to teach them that a person does not live by bread alone, but by whatever God decrees. Ibn Ezra on Deuteronomy 8:3 explains that the phrase “what proceeds from the mouth of God” refers to God’s will and command.

Bread represents the ordinary and visible process through which we receive sustenance. We plant, harvest, grind, bake and eat. It is easy to imagine that this familiar process is the source of life itself. The manna temporarily removed that familiar mechanism. By feeding the Israelites in an unmistakably miraculous fashion, God revealed that bread is only one instrument through which He sustains life. The visible process is real, but it is not the deepest reality.

Like the inhabitants of the Matrix, we can become so absorbed in the world immediately before us that we mistake its mechanisms for its ultimate source. We see work, money, food, medicine and human effort, but behind them stands a divine will that allows all those systems to function.

May we learn to look beyond the visible structures of our lives and recognize the deeper power that sustains them.

Shabbat Shalom,

Ben-Tzion

Dedication

To the memory of Rabbi Yaakov Aharon Farber z”l, founder of the Ma'alot Tzur haredi enlistment program.