

EKEV

By Jeremy Burton

“Take care... Lest you eat and be satisfied, you build good houses and settle. And your cattle and sheep and goats increase, and you increase silver and gold for yourselves, and everything that you have will increase. And your heart will become haughty and you will forget Hashem, your G-d who took you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery...And you may say in your heart “My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth.”

It shall be that if your forget... and go after the gods of others and worship them and prostrate yourself to them...so you will perish.” *Excerpt from Deut. 8:11-20*

Having just reassured the Israelites that they would be led to an abundant land where they will “eat and be satisfied,” Moses warns the people to take heed lest in their financial successes to come they would become haughty. This warning is immediately followed by an admonition against following the gods of other nations. The verse is interpreted as a specific commandment against arrogance and the Talmud (Sotah 4b) notes that violation of this commandment is akin to idol worship.

What is the importance of a warning that roots arrogance in the successes of wealth and property? Why does Moses warn the people by suggesting that they will forget their experience as slaves? What lessons from this admonition can we bring in to our own lives today?

The Torah sees nothing wrong per se in having material possessions. Our biblical forebearers were blessed with wealth, abundant flocks and other possessions. The promise of land, crops and precious metals are often presented in the Bible as the reward for living a life of faith and virtue.

And yet, Moses presents a downside of wealth. The specific concern is that we will come to see wealth as our own, made by our own hand without divine assistance, and that we will forget the divine presence in our lives.

This admonition of our Torah portion was apparently forgotten in the period of the Kingdom of Israel, with direct repercussions for the society’s connection to a Jewish value of justice. In the period of the first temple, an affluent class emerges with a growing economic and social gap between themselves and the poor amongst the people. The rise of prophets such as Amos, Micah and Hosea directly accompanies an increasing tendency amongst the affluent to mistreat the poor through exploitative behavior, driven by a sense of arrogance about their station in life. The wealthy are called to task for engaging in devout sacrificial service to G-d while passing the hungry in the streets outside the temple.

Amos in particular criticizes this tendency towards ritual observance with the absence of morality, saying, “Even if you offer up to Me burnt-offerings...I will not be appeased. But let justice roll up like water, and righteousness like a mighty stream.” (Amos 5:22-24)

Rabbi Joseph Telushkin (in “Biblical Literacy”) has observed that the common theme amongst these prophets is their argument that morality is G-d’s supreme commandment. He notes that bible critics have argued that this ethical preaching is a new concept not derived from the Torah of Moses. He quotes Walter Kaufmann, the late Princeton philosopher to effectively demolish this critique, saying that to believe that the moral injunction was new is “in effect to believe that (they,) independent of each other and without the least awareness of their originality – came up all at once with the same moral demands... echoed almost immediately by (other prophets who) also seemed to think that their people had long been told what they were reminding them of.”

It is in readings such as this week that we find the root of this moral voice. It is left to us to make the connection of the divine in our economic lives with a sense of our rootedness in our Exodus experience. At the Passover Seder we see ourselves as if we had been slaves in Egypt, as a way of challenging ourselves to empathize with the disadvantaged in our own lives. This Shabbat we remind ourselves that especially in prosperity we must recall that experience, of being slaves AND being redeemed by a power external to our own ability, as a way to avoid arrogance derived from our economic advantages.

Today we are blessed as individuals and as a Jewish community to be experiencing the greatest economic and political power that we have ever known. As Americans we live in a society that is both the most powerful and wealthiest in the world, but also one in which economic gaps and class advantages are real and present. At such times we challenge ourselves to heed Moses and be wary of the downside of our success. Once again we should listen to the prophetic voice in Judaism, to again focus our energies, our wealth, and our power on the pursuit of social justice as an inherent component of our Judaism.

Shabbat Shalom

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