

Gifts & Temptations

In the Torah we find repeated instances of the Israelites being warned to ‘remember’ and ‘observe;’ that is, to remember God’s saving acts in history, and to observe the commandments so as to enjoy continued blessings. The Jewish sages taught that the Torah never repeats itself without good reason. Repetition calls for the reader’s careful attention. In this spirit, let’s explore an example.

Read Deuteronomy 8:7-11 and 8:12-18. Here we find two passages which are quite similar. Each describes the blessings of living in the Promised Land, and each follows with a warning not to forget ‘the Lord your God.’ Though similar passages, there are differences. Can you pick them?

The first describes the prosperity of the Israelites in terms of the natural fertility of the land, a land of running waters and unlimited supplies of grains, fruits, vegetables and minerals. Seven times the word *eretz* (‘land’) appears in this passage. Note how the flow of the text conjures up a picture of lush countryside, abundance, profound satisfaction. But why the warning about forgetting the Lord and failing to keep his commandments? What might be the temptation facing the Israelites as they come upon this land flowing with milk and honey?

The second passage also describes the prosperity of the Israelites, but this time in terms of the works of their hands after some time of settlement: fine houses, numerous herds and flocks, riches of silver and gold. Yet, once again, the bright picture is suddenly clouded with a warning about ‘forgetting the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt’ (8:14). What might be the temptation contained in this second description of blessing as the Israelites ‘settle in’ to their long-awaited Promised Land? And how does it differ from the first?

Say the Jewish sages, the first warning refers to the temptation of being intoxicated by natural goodness, of failing to enjoy blessings in

moderation, of allowing instinct to override self-control. Worse still, it is allowing one’s enthusiasm to lead to the wrong god, e.g., the pagan gods of fertility, rather than the true Creator God.

The warning in the second passage refers to the temptation of being overly confident in one’s abilities, of thinking that ‘my power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth’ (8:17) and forgetting that all blessings ultimately depend on the hand of Almighty God.

Both temptations refer to complacency, taking for granted God’s gifts, a blindness to God’s miraculous hand at work. Nachmanides (13th c. Talmudic scholar) comments that in the desert the Israelites depended on God’s miraculous gifts (e.g., manna) for their survival; recollection of these events should serve to remind us that it is the same God, with the same miraculous powers, who continues to provide for our needs, even if now the miracles in our lives seem ‘ordinary’ or hidden.

Reflection

A blessing from God is no guarantee that fidelity to God will follow. In any given situation, fidelity involves a conscious, free choice.

Reflect on a time when (a) you were confronted by one of the two temptations mentioned above; and (b) you made a conscious choice for God.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women’s Commentary* (New York, 2008); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (New York, 1996); *The Artscroll Interlinear Siddur* (New York, 2002); Scripture: NRSV.

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