

The Danger of Prosperity – Parashat Bereishit

Rav Hanan Schlesinger

At the conclusion of God's creation of man in this week's Torah portion, a blessing is bestowed upon humanity by our Creator: "Be fruitful and multiply; fill the earth and subdue it." We are given dominion over the entire universe to build, mold, construct, harness, and conquer. Humankind is made partner with God to continue where the Creator left off, to improve living conditions, to exploit natural resources, and to create wealth and prosperity.

So indeed we learn from the very first weekly reading at the beginning of our Torah. But nothing is so simple. There are limits. Almost all good things are a two-edged sword. The very last weekly portion of the Torah, which we concluded a mere seven days ago, warns us against going overboard in our cultivation of riches and luxury.

Moments before his death, Moses encourages the Jewish People: "Thus **Israel** shall dwell secure, solitary, the fountain of **Jacob**, in a **land** of **grain** and **wine**; even his **heavens** shall drip with **dew**". This blessing cannot but remind us of an earlier blessing in the Book of Genesis. Isaac blesses his son **Jacob**, who will also carry the name **Israel**, with the following words: "And may God grant you of the **dew** of the **heavens** and of the fatness of the **land**, and abundant **grain** and **wine**" (Genesis 27:28). The echo of Isaac's blessing that we hear in the words of Moses cannot but be intentional. So if Moses repeated the words of his forefather and proclaimed that the patriarch's wishes will indeed one day be brought to fruition, why does Moses omit the central concept of the patriarch Isaac's vision? Why does Moses make no mention of fatness and abundance? The key to the answer is to be located in a fundamental difference of perspective between Moses and God. You see, the words of Moses that we quoted above are drawn from his final words to the Jewish People. Fondly referring to the Jewish People by the name of

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Jeshurun, he lauds the reciprocal loving relationship between God and His people. Our wholehearted acceptance of God's kingship, and of His Torah and commandments, is set forth by Moses in poetic, optimistic language. God is our shield and protector, proclaims Moses: "Fortunate are you of Israel: Who is like you, O people delivered by God, the shield of your succor" (Deuteronomy 33:1-5, 26-29).

But these words are not spoken in a vacuum. They are actually a reaction, an objection, if you will, to a Divine prophecy recorded in the second to last portion of the Torah. Immediately prior to Moses' final blessing, we read God's final words to the Jewish People, and they are as pessimistic as the poetry of Moses was optimistic. In no uncertain terms, God proclaims in Parashat Ha'azinu that the Jewish future will be one of failure and tragedy; rebellion against God, and in its wake Divine alienation, anger, and punishment.

In reading the Divine prediction of doom, it is not difficult to hone in on the linchpin of the tragedy: "With the fattest of lambs, and rams and he-goats, with the very fattest of wheat, and delicious wine like the blood of grapes, so Jeshurun will become fat and kicked. You will grow fat and thick and corpulent – and will desert God your maker and become contemptuous of the Rock of salvation" (Deuteronomy 32:14-15). And now we understand only too well why Moses neglected to make mention of abundance and fatness, despite the fact that these concepts are central to the blessing spoken by Isaac upon which he models his words. The faithful leader of the Jewish nation cannot let God's pessimism carry the day. The All-Knowing One sees into the future, but man was granted free will, and man can therefore alter the Divinely predicted future. Divine pessimism is countered by Mosaic optimism, and the key to this beatific vision is none other than the repudiation of over-abundance and fatness. God foresees our downfall, and at its roots is luxury and opulence. Moses foresees our future glory, life in harmony with the Divine Presence and the Divine Law, and it is predicated on a culture

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that indeed enjoys grain and wine and the dew of heaven, but that at the same time eschews lavish extravagance and super-affluence.

Yes, it is God's will as expressed in this week's Torah portion that we conquer and harness nature to achieve wealth and prosperity. And at the same time, our very success in this Divinely mandated effort can easily become the cause of our downfall. Too much material success may bring us to lose sight of the very meaning of our existence. If we wish not to be cursed by our blessings, we must employ self-restraint in order to cultivate them in proper measure. Too much of a good thing...may be a very bad thing indeed.

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