

This week's parasha, Eikev, is the third in Deuteronomy, Moshe's long and final speech to the Israelites. In this week's parashah, he definitively shifts from focusing on his recollections of the foibles and lessons of the Israelites' past 40 years, and to focusing on what will await them as they enter the land of Israel, without him to guide them. He describes the land of Israel in several ways, as a place of abundance, as place where the seven species grow, as Nate will discuss tomorrow. (# of the seven can be found flourishing on our synagogue property.)

I owe a debt to Rabbi Shai Held and to the participants in our weekly Torah study for my insights this evening. Near the end of the parashah, he contrasts the land of Israel to the land of Egypt. In chapter 11, verses 10-12, Moshe offers this puzzling comparison: ". . .the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt from which you have come. There the grain you sowed had to be watered by your own labors, like a vegetable garden;" - literally, 'watered by your foot' - "but the land you are about to cross into and possess, a land of hills and valleys, soaks up its water from the rains of heaven. It is a land which Hashem your God looks after, on which Hashem your God always keeps an eye, from year's beginning to year's end."

I say that this comparison is puzzling, because there is a clear implication that the comparison is in Canaan's favor, - consider "you had to water" versus, "soaks up its water from the rains of heaven." But despite this presumption, Egypt was known as the bread basket of ancient world. Abraham and Sarah traveled there in Genesis 12 when there was a famine in Canaan, and in fact the Israelites wound up being slaves in Egypt because the family of Joseph settled there during *another* famine in Canaan.

But even if we consider this text outside of that historical context, as Rabbi Shai Held points out the text is describing the fact that in Egypt, there was an irrigation system based on the everflowing Nile, – you could water your land even when there wasn't rain – whereas in the land of Israel, all agriculture was dependent on seasonal rains. Any farmer would prefer the control and predictability of being able to irrigate their land reliably, rather than relying on what this text literally frames as the whim of heaven. Certainly, the medieval French commentator Rashi (who, to be fair, was a vintner and knew something about agriculture) suggests that this is truly a favorable agricultural comparison, because only the lowlands in Egypt could be irrigated whereas even the highlands in the land of Israel could be fertile because of their dependance on rain.

But Rashi is an outlier. Many commentators actually concede some discomfort with the comparison. As Sforno puts it, “The land is not like the land of Egypt, “which does not require rainfall. For [in Canaan] there are not enough rivers to irrigate the farmland, so that the earth requires rainfall to irrigate the crops. [Hashem looks after it] to carefully scrutinize the deeds of its inhabitants to determine if they are deserving the rain or not.”

Rabbi Shai Held suggests that it is the very precariousness of the land that makes it *morally preferable*: “Living in Egypt, one can easily forget God; living in Israel, aware of one's ongoing dependence, one is more likely to remember God at all times (comments to Deuteronomy 11:10). To be dependent on the rain, in other words, is to be dependent on the God who sends the rain. In the wilderness, Israel looked heavenward for bread itself; in the Land of Promise, it will look

heavenward—for the rain which will enable it to grow bread...” And why is that a moral good?

To answer that question, we should look at a warning that comes earlier in the parashah, back in Deuteronomy 8:

“When you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses to live in, and your herds and flocks have multiplied, and your silver and gold have increased, and everything you own has prospered, beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget Hashem your God—who freed you from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage . . . and you say to yourselves, ‘My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.’ Remember that it is Hashem your God who gives you the power to get wealth, in fulfillment of the covenant that He made on oath with your fathers, as is still the case.”

The greatest moral danger for a people settled in their land, Moshe seems to say, is not the danger that comes of scarcity, but the danger that comes with comfortable abundance: the danger that we will accept all of our prosperity, our achievements, our blessings as duly *ours*, the fruit of “my own power and the work of my hands.” He instructs us to recognize that our blessings are in fact blessings – perhaps in part the fruit of our labors, but in greater part due to the divine mystery that causes hardship for some and prosperity for others, and which some of us call God. And if we recognize that, we can retain the spiritual humility that will allow us to collectively thrive in the land.

As I considered these texts, I thought of the passage in Pirkei Avot, chapter 5, mishnah 10: “There are 4 kinds of people: One that says: “what’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is yours””: this is a commonplace type; [though] some say this

the character of Sodom. [One that says:] “what’s mine is yours and what’s yours is mine”: essentially a fool. [One that says:] “what’s mine is yours and what’s yours is yours” is a pious person. [One that says:] “what’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is mine” is a wicked person.”

We can all recognize that the final character is wicked; the one who feels entitled to everything whether they worked for it or not. If everyone behaved that way, society could not function for a day. The trickier character is the first, the one who says “what’s mine is mine and what’s yours is yours.” This is a very normal, common posture, but it is also, suggestively the characteristic of Sodom, which was destroyed for its inhospitable wickedness. Because that attitude can easily devolve into, “I deserve my lot, you deserve your lot; I owe you nothing and we need have nothing to do with each other.” Society can arguably function with that posture prevalent for a while – arguably, it is the prevalent posture in our society, and yet, it cannot function well over the long haul. With that posture, public institutions decay, as no one takes responsibility for their thriving. The most vulnerable would not be cared for.

And so what our parashah does is attempts to inoculate us against that posture, as it reminds us that all of our blessings are dependent on heaven; which means that if we are fortunate, we owe something back to heaven, which can be payed forward to any needy human, created in the image of God, and who’s fate could easily be our own but for a whim of heaven. What’s mine, in fact, is *not* mine, and what’s yours, in fact, is *not* yours. Not entirely. Partially, perhaps. But what’s mine is also God’s, and also *ours*, and what’s yours is also God’s and also *ours*, as Ken

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Rosemarin eloquently put it in Torah study. And if we remember to share the abundance and the scarcity, we can truly thrive together.

Shabbat shalom.