

The curse of having everything you want

In this week's Torah portion, *Ekev*, Moses tells the Israelites:

[Remember God] Who fed you in the wilderness with manna... that He might humble you, and that He might test you, to benefit you in the end. [Deut. 8:16]

Earlier in Exodus we heard a similar line directly from God:

Then the Lord said to Moses: Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you... that I may test them, whether they will walk in my Torah, or not. [Ex. 16:4]

God sends us food from heaven, in the desert where there is no food, and the Torah calls that a TEST? What is the test? Who is being tested and why?

Rashi says the test was whether the Israelites would follow the directions about gathering manna: First, not storing any of it for the next day, and second, collecting a double portion before Shabbat, but none on Shabbat. Sforino says, more generally, that the test is: Will the Jews still follow the Torah when they do not have to worry about their livelihood?

This last explanation is borne out by the full quote in our portion:

[Moses said:] When you have eaten and are full... beware that you not forget the Lord your God, in not keeping His commandments... [And] when you... have built goodly houses, and lived there, and when your herds and your flocks are multiplied, and your silver and your gold are multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied..., [beware that you do not] you forget the Lord your God, who brought you out of... the house of slavery; who led you through that great and terrible wilderness, where there were venomous serpents, and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water; who brought you water out of the rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna... that He might humble you, and that He might test you, to benefit you in the end; and you say in your heart: "My power and the might of my hand has gotten me this wealth." [Deut. 8:10-17]

The implication here is that too much wealth, too much comfort, too little adversity tend to turn people away from God and away from the observance of Judaism. We know it doesn't **have** to be that way. There

are plenty of rich observant Jews and poor non-observant Jews. But the question is: Is this the way to bet? The experience of American Jewry seems to answer: No! As they went from poverty in the shtetl to prosperity in America, they drifted more and more away from observance and towards assimilation and secularism.

Remember the four sons of the Pessah Haggadah? A commentator has observed that they are the four generations of American Jews since they came to the US:

- The first generation is the wise son: Observant, Jewishly knowledgeable and Jewishly committed.
- The second generation is the wicked son: Eager to distance himself from his heritage, but still Jewishly knowledgeable.
- The third generation is the simple son: He had a bar mitzvah but has forgotten what he learned to prepare for it.
- The fourth generation is the son unable to ask: He knows vaguely that he has a Jewish connection, but nothing else. He **literally** does not even know what questions to ask.
- There is no fifth generation. There is no Jewish fifth son. Over and out.

A 19th-century Austrian sage, Rav Avraham Shaag, said, wisely: “I am afraid that my grandchildren will become wealthy. The dangers of wealth far exceed the dangers of poverty.”

Rabbi Bahya ibn Paquda, from 11th-century Spain, writes that, unlike animals, God made people work hard for a living because it allows them to control their evil inclination, their *yetzer hara*. [Shaar Habitachon] With our free time so limited, we are better able to resist temptations.

Many people turn to religion only when they encounter problems, not when times are good. They see God only as the Provider, and if they think they have everything they need, they assume they do not need God. When I was twelve or so, back in Egypt, I remember a wealthy classmate of mine telling me at school that his father’s business and property had just been seized by the Egyptians, and that they would have to leave the country very soon (which they did – we all did). The next day was Shabbat. I went to services at the synagogue as usual. There was my classmate, with his father next to him. I had never seen them there before, and I went to services often. All of a sudden the father remembered that Jews are supposed to go to services.

In the Mishna, in Pirkei Avot, Rabbi Yonatan said:

He who fulfills the Torah in poverty shall in the end fulfill it in wealth. He who disregards the Torah in wealth shall in the end disregard it in poverty. [Pirkei Avot 4:11]

This quote neatly sets up a perpetual motion machine through the generations: First poor and observant, then rich and observant, then rich and non-observant, then poor and non-observant, then back to poor and observant. Our very survival seems to depend on this pendulum swinging back and bringing some of our people back into the fold.

But if the “test” related to the manna is really a general test of whether we would still be observant when our needs are met, one would expect the phrase “to test you” to be repeated every time God gave us something: When He gave us water in the desert, when He freed us from slavery in Egypt, when He guided us to our Promised Land, when He allowed us to be victorious in battle. But it is not repeated. So why does only the “manna” constitute a “test”?

Nachmanides provides an answer: The test was a subtle test of faith. God provided only one day’s worth of manna at a time, with instructions not to store any of it for the next day. No pantry, no “money in the bank”, as it were. The people were forced to live from day to day, without knowing for sure whether they will have food the next day. Will they continue to have faith in God even under these conditions? That was the test.

Why was this “no storage” condition necessary? We can only speculate. Perhaps its miraculous properties would show only if a full daily ration was eaten every day, no more and no less. You have to remember that manna was no ordinary food. First, it was completely absorbed by the body and left no residue – so no need to go to the bathroom. Second, it tasted like whatever you wanted it to taste. The Midrash says:

-The manna changed in their mouth into any taste they desired. [Numbers Rabbah 15:24]

-The manna [tasted] according to the needs of each individual... The young men ate it as bread... the old as wafers made with honey... the babies as milk from their mothers’ breasts... the sick as fine flour mingled with honey... the heathen as bitter as coriander seed... [Exodus Rabbah 5:9]

-They could taste in the manna all the dainties of the world! Whoever longed for meat obtained the taste of it. Whoever longed for fish obtained the taste of it. Whoever longed for rooster or pheasant or peacock got the taste of whatever he asked for. [Numbers Rabbah 7:4]

-All kinds of flavors lodged in the manna, so that each Israelite could taste in it anything he particularly liked... When a man desired anything special to eat, he only had to say: I wish I had [this] to eat, and the morsel of manna in his mouth immediately acquired the [desired] taste. [Exodus Rabbah 25:3]

Now, let us move on to my second point. There is a deeper peril in having everything you want: You get bored. You lack a purpose in life. You lack challenges. You feel worthless.

Close your eyes and imagine a utopian world in the far future. There are no more wars, no more diseases, no more natural disasters, no more accidents. There is no more famine, no more crime, no more hatred. All material needs are satisfied for free for everybody: Food, shelter, comfort, sex, entertainment, perfect health, perfect weather, etc. Robots, machines and technological gadgets do all the physical work. Ask anything and it's yours at no cost and no effort.

Virtual reality software lets you act out all your fantasies safely. There is no aging after 21, and you can get eternal life if you want it. You don't like the way you look? Instant and painless plastic surgery can make you handsome, thin, and perfectly proportioned. Your ideal mate is found scientifically for you, and you like the result. You don't want to live through nine months of pregnancy? The entire gestation period can take place in the safety of a lab. There are no birth defects.

You want to learn something new? No need to go through the agony of studying and trying to understand. Just put a special helmet on, and the entire field of knowledge is transferred to your brain. You become an instant expert! You have immediate access to all available information, which is to say: All information.

The whole universe is explored and colonized. All knowledge is attained. All questions are answered. You want to help humanity, but humanity needs no help. You want to solve problems, but there are no problems to solve.

Is this bliss? What would you do in such a world? You'd get up in the morning, then you'd... what? Indulge in pleasure after pleasure? You'll get bored fast.

This theme is not new. In 1960, there was an episode of the *Twilight Zone* show, called "*A nice place to visit*", in which this scenario plays out. A criminal is killed by the police while trying to escape. He finds himself in a place where his every wish is granted by an angel who is always at his side. He gets all the women he wants, but laments: "It doesn't mean anything if it's all set up in advance." He asks if he can rob a bank, and the angel answers: "Sure, I can arrange that. Now, what brand getaway car would you like?" He asks: "Is there ANY chance I'll get caught?" The angel tells him: "Sure, if you want it. Let me make a note of it." The criminal says it's no fun if he knows the outcome. He gambles, but wins every time. He sighs: "This is not gambling; it's charity!" After a while he is thoroughly bored to tears and asks to leave what he thinks is heaven. He then finds out he is in hell, and is doomed to remain there for all eternity!

Hell is having everything you want, all the time. If we had no problems to solve and no challenges, if our every wish were granted immediately, we would find life empty and unbearably boring. Hard as it is to accept: evil, problems, and unpleasantness may be necessary in order that we may find life worth living. The satisfaction is in the seeking, not in the getting.

So these are the twin perils of having everything you want. First, you fall away from religion and Jewish observance because you feel you need nothing from God. Second, you live in deep boredom because life has no challenges, no unanswered questions, no mountains to climb, nothing to do that will make you feel proud of yourself.

Now, this, of course, is counterintuitive. In the play *Fiddler on the Roof*, when Tevye is told that money is the world's curse, he answers, "May the Lord smite me with it! And may I never recover!" That's how most of us feel – until we stop and think about it. Now, far from me the thought of wishing problems on anybody, but we must recognize that without problems, life would be dull and uninteresting. There is a saying, purported to be a curse, which says, "May you live in interesting times." But is it really a curse?

As they say: Be careful what you wish for: You may get it. Life is truly a paradox!

Shabbat shalom.