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D'var Torah on Devarim

Does wealth lead to lack of Jewish observance?

Today's Torah portion, Devarim, always comes before Tish'a b'Av. Tish'a b'Av begins Monday evening. The main theme is that we are responsible for the fall of the two Temples -- the first Temple because of lack of observance, the second Temple because of senseless hatred, perhaps brought on by excessive zeal in observance. I'll be discussing this second angle on Monday evening. Today I would like to focus on the first angle -- lack of observance -- and more specifically one possible reason for lack of observance: Too much wealth. Too much comfort. Too little adversity.

Let me back up. The parsha begins as follows:

Deut. 1:1. These are the words which Moses spoke to all Israel on that side of the Jordan in the desert, in the plain, opposite the Sea of Reeds, between Paran and Tofel and Lavan and Hazereth and Di Zahav.

If the purpose of the verse is simply to identify a place, the place where Moses spoke, why does it need nine separate scattered markers? It says Moses spoke to Israel (1) on that side of the Jordan (2) in the desert, (3) in the plain, (4) opposite the Sea of Reeds, between (5) Paran and (6) Tofel and (7) Lavan and (8) Hazereth and (9) Di Zahav. The answer is in Sifrei Devarim, a halachic midrash written in Talmudic times. It points out that these nine places are all the places where the Israelites sinned and angered God. For example, Hazereth is where the rebellion led by Korach took place. Paran is where the spies left from, to scout the land of Canaan, and they eventually brought back a demoralizing report.

I would like to concentrate on the last place, Di-Zahav. There is no such place. Literally, it means "enough gold". "Di", as in "Dai", as in "Dayenu", means "enough", and "zahav" is "gold". Because of the mention of gold, and the tradition that these are places where Israel sinned, the Talmud [Berachot 32a] connects it with the sin of the Golden Calf:

The school of R. Jannai [said]: ...What is "And Di-Zahav"?... Thus spoke Moses before the Holy One, blessed be He: Sovereign of the Universe: "The silver and gold [zahav] which You showered on Israel until they said, Enough [dai], *that* it what led to their making the [Golden] Calf."

So God is accused of giving Israel the riches that allowed them to make the Golden Calf, and therefore God is responsible for their sin. God *told*

Israel to ask the Egyptians for gold. They did not do it at their own initiative. So the Talmud continues:

-R. Hiyya b. Abba said: It is like the case of a man who had a son. He bathed him and anointed him and gave him plenty to eat and drink and hung a purse around his neck and set him down at the door of a house of ill-repute. How could the boy help sinning?

-R. Aha the son of R. Huna said in the name of R. Shesheth: This bears out the popular saying: A [man with a] full stomach is unpleasant, as it says [in the Book of Hosea], 'When they were fed they became full, they were filled and their heart was exalted; therefore they have forgotten [God]'. [Hos. 13:6].

-R. Nahman learned it from Deuteronomy [Deut. 8:14]
[Deut. 8:11. Beware that you not forget the Lord your God...

12. ...when you have eaten and are full, and have built goodly houses, and lived there;

13. And when your herds and your flocks multiply, and your silver and your gold is multiplied, and all that you have is multiplied;

14. and] your heart is lifted up, ... [do not] forget the Lord your God

-The Rabbis [learned it] from here: 'And they shall have eaten their fill and waxen fat, and turned to other gods [Deut. 31:20]...

The Talmud then makes this extraordinary and very Jewish statement, reminiscent of Tevye the Dairyman in *Fiddler on the Roof*:

R. Abbahu said: ... Moses took hold of the Holy One, blessed be He, like a man who seizes his fellow by his garment and said before Him: "Sovereign of the Universe, I will not let You go until You forgive and pardon them."

Let's not dwell on whether God is responsible for giving us the things that tempt us to stray, and therefore is responsible for us straying. (At the very least, this does not absolve us.) The question I want to ask is: Is it true that good times and good fortune tend to turn people away from God and away from the observance of Judaism? I 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?

I won't give you an answer because I don't know of a scientific study. But anecdotal evidence certainly is strong.

The experience of American Jews seems to bear this out. As they went from poverty in the Eastern European 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 Ellis Island:

- 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.

Note that the most observant families *are* frequently the poorest. In the shtetl, they were dirt poor and most observant. In the State of Israel today, there are tens of thousands of Orthodox scholars who spend all their time studying Torah and are supported by the state and their communities. They live at or below the poverty level, usually by choice as they *could* work for a living if they wanted to.

The Talmud recounts the story of a rich rabbi who lived as a pauper while studying Torah:

[If a rich man says to you: I have not occupied myself with Torah because I am occupied with my possessions, tell him:] Were you by any chance richer than R. Eleazar [b. Harsom?] His father left him a thousand cities on the continent and a thousand boats on the sea. [Yet] every day he would take a sack of flour on his shoulder and go from city to city and from province to province to study the Torah. One day his [own] servants found him and [without recognizing him] seized him for public service. He said to them: I beg of you, let me go to study the Torah. They said: By the life of [our master] R. Eleazar b. Harsom, we shall not let you go. He had never seen them, for he was sitting all day and all night occupying himself with the Torah. [Yoma 35b]

A 19th-century Austrian sage, Rav Avraham Shaag, went to live in Jerusalem in 1873. Shortly after he got there, he bought a piece of land just outside Jaffa Gate. Real estate values promptly rose. So he told his agent to sell the property. His son asked why he was selling his land precisely when its value was going up. Rav Avraham explained: "I am afraid that my grandchildren will become wealthy. The dangers of wealth far exceed the dangers of poverty."

Many people turn to religion only in adversity, not when times are good. I suppose they see God only as the Provider, and if they think they have

everything they need, they think 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 probably have to leave the country very soon (which they did – we all did). The next day was Shabbat, and I went to services at the synagogue as usual. There was my classmate, with his father next to him. I had never seen his father there before, and I went to the synagogue often. All of a sudden he remembered that Jews are supposed to go to services.

This being the case, can one argue, with some commentators, that God made disasters rain upon us Jews to keep us observant? Let's turn to the worst disaster of all: The Holocaust. Did the Holocaust make Jews more observant? It is true that the opposite was true for many Holocaust survivors: They turned away from Judaism because they could not bear the consequences of being Jewish. But they were a minority. Overall, it is probably the case that average Jewish observance today is higher than before the Holocaust. The average "turn to the right" throughout the spectrum of Judaism is unmistakable.

In the Talmud, 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.

And it's not just less observance. It is also true that the more people have the more they tend to complain. Give an inch, they'll take a mile. In the desert, the more God gave the Israelites in goods and services, the more they complained. They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you took us out to die in the wilderness?" [Exodus 14:11] God fed them manna, which tradition tells us tasted like anything they wanted it to taste, but they still complained that they wanted more variety in food. They complained that the water was too bitter. If you can believe it, the Midrash tells us that when God split the sea for them, they complained that their

shoes were getting muddy [Exodus Rabbah 24:1]. Our verse today lists no less than nine grave sins.

But let's keep things in proportion:

-First, "wealthy" does not mean "all bad". Wealthy people obviously can and do accomplish a lot. Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak of Lubavitch said:

Wealthy people are self-confident, have high self-esteem, are expansive, arrogant, and ridicule the poor. Poor people have little self-confidence, are contrite, broken, disheartened and self-deprecating. Among these ten characteristics are the finest of virtues and the worst of faults.

Note that he did not say which is which. For example, being self-confident, in moderation, is a condition for success in any field.

-Second, we must draw a distinction between observance and Jewish commitment. Wealth may turn many Jews away from personal observance, but there is no evidence that it turns them away from Jewish commitment. By this I mean that they will gladly give a million dollars to a yeshiva so that *other* Jews can study Torah and be observant *for them*, or give a million dollars to Israeli institutions so that *other* Jews can take care of the ancient homeland *for them*.

As I said, I don't have answers. But I always go back to the deep wisdom of Ben Zoma in the Talmud:

Ezehu 'ashir? Ha-sameach b'chelko.

Who is rich? He who is happy with his lot. [Pirkei Avot 4:1]

Shabbat shalom and have an easy fast on Tish'a b'Av.