

Health or Prosperity?

Rabbi Melanie Aron

May 15, 2020

What is more important, health or prosperity? I bet you can think up some good arguments on both sides.

Right now that is a big question, but it also interested the rabbis reading this week's Torah portion. For them, health was not just physical but also spiritual, and the right balance between spiritual well-being and material prosperity was an issue.

Near the conclusion of this week's Torah portion, the last in the book of Leviticus, we find a long chapter featuring blessings and curses, positive consequences for following God's rules and negative consequences for disobeying them.

As much as these curses might seem harsh to us, it actually was the style of ancient covenants or contracts in the Middle East to include these sorts of promises and threats. They come to remind those signing the contract of the seriousness of the commitments that they were making. We see this again at the conclusion of the Book of Deuteronomy, where the blessings and especially the curses are equally extreme. These codes were not to be empty words, posted on a stone tablet and ignored. These codes brought that home, giving teeth to the contract much like the incentive or disincentive payments on modern contracts.

The blessings section of our parshah is relatively short.

It begins with material prosperity, rain in its season, bountiful crops and harvest, fertility in family members and domesticated animals.

It moves on to the peace and security that would allow the ancient farmer to enjoy this prosperity: protection from war as well as from vicious beasts. Just as an aside, we have seen pictures this week, showing how little it takes for animals to start retaking their turf.

Finally, in the blessings, there is a section speaking about the Israelites' relationship with God, that it be close and positive, allowing us to experience kommimiut, a sense of standing upright in contrast to our downtrodden state as slaves.

The famous priestly blessing follows a somewhat similar threefold pattern:

May God bless you and keep you—understood as a reference to material prosperity.

May God's countenance shine upon you and be gracious to you—to spiritual fulfillment.

And the final blessing: *May God bestow favor upon you and grant you peace*—understood to be the capstone that made other blessings secure.

Both in our Torah portion and in the priestly benediction, physical blessings precede spiritual blessings. Perhaps this is in recognition of the human hierarchy of needs: food before shelter, physical safety before spiritual enrichment. Schools

interestingly take precedence in Jewish law over Torah scrolls, privileging the education of the next generation over the erudition of scholars. Education took precedence also over synagogues. That might have been a reflection of the well-known teaching, *Talmud Torah keneged kulam*, the study of Torah is weighed equally to all the rest of the commandments. Or perhaps it was in recognition of something we have come to learn, that a building is not the essence of a synagogue, that we can be a shul in other ways as well.

But what about an answer to our question? Life and health seem to be assumed in these blessings. What can they tell us about the tension right now between seeking prosperity and maintaining health?

The assumption of good health disappears in the curses; in fact, they begin with illness:

“I will wreak misery upon you, consumption and fever, which cause the eyes to pine and the body to languish.” Perhaps the curses start here because without health, none of the blessings have any value, and sickness is the prelude to other disasters. Think of how today as well, sickness leads to economic woes and is a major cause of individual bankruptcies.

Our American individualism can lead us to say, It’s my body, my life and I can do with it what I want. Don’t Nanny State me and force me to protect my life or my health.

That is not the Jewish understanding. Strictly speaking we don't own our bodies any more than we own the earth. Our body and the breath within it are a gift from God. Therefore, God can command us, Take good care of the life I have given you. The mitzvah, traditionally called *shemirat haquf*, derives from this verse in Deuteronomy: "Guard yourself, and guard your life force very carefully" (Deut. 4:9). The great scholar Maimonides, who was a physician, codified it as follows: "When keeping the body in health and vigor, one walks in the way of God. . . . It is a person's duty to avoid whatever is injurious to the body and cultivate habits conducive to health and vigor."

Health or prosperity? Judaism would say it's not a choice. Without the first, the second is meaningless, and besides, we don't have the right to sacrifice the one, however much we may long for the other. Waiting for economic prosperity is difficult, but in some ways we are like the ancient Israelite farmer at the beginning of this week's portion who was told to leave his field fallow every seventh year, giving up an immediate wealth for what we now understand were long-term benefits to the health of his soil.

The sacrifices we are bearing now are significant and some are bearing them more than others. But placing prosperity first, before health, may leave us with neither.

May we find a way to build our society back to a state of blessing, where good health, prosperity, and security are available to all.