

What Threatens our Faith Most

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What is more of a challenge to a person's understanding of God—famine or abundance, painful loss or overwhelming success?

You might have had the experience with a friend or family member who finds their faith in God shaken by their own illness or that of a loved one. What did he or she do to deserve this suffering, they may ask, as someone they love is stricken with Alzheimer's or Parkinson's? Some feel that they have experienced a disproportionate amount of *tzuris*, trouble, like the hero of Philip Roth's book *Nemesis*, whose mother dies, whose father is an embezzler who goes to jail and then disappears, and who himself is later stricken with polio. There is something Job-like when some people can't seem to get a break but are the victims of one disaster after another. Job's relationship with God is shaken by his sense of the unfairness of what he has experienced. Just tell me what I have done wrong, he asks, and then I will be able to accept my fate.

Even when God is not understood as a force managing the universe, suffering can dislodge our certainties about life and the world, which may function in our lives as a form of faith. Last week, for example, I was talking on the phone with one of our members in her 90s. She was looking around at what was going on and said to me, in a shaken voice, "I thought America was a good country." That was also a form of broken faith.

In this week's Torah portion, Moses acknowledges that hardships try a person. He speaks about the difficulties the Israelites endured during their wanderings. But that is not the focus of his worries. His concern is more with the opposite, with the people settling on the land, reaping bountiful harvests, being so pleased with what they perceive as the work of their hands that they forget God altogether. He is concerned that they will see themselves as the sole source of their own success and be filled with pride.

A number of years ago, Rabbi Joel Fleekop did an interesting experiment with a group of members of the congregation. At the time there was some resistance to one of our social justice projects. It was suggested that we Jews had managed to pull ourselves up from poverty to the middle class in one generation, so why couldn't today's immigrants do the same? Rabbi Fleekop asked people whether their families had benefited from any government programs. At first there was a lot of shaking of heads, but then he asked specifically—about the GI Bill after World War II and Korea, and about government-sponsored mortgage guarantees. For many Jewish families it was free college tuition (City College in New York in particular) that enabled them to make the jump from the Lower East Side out to Long Island or up to Westchester.

During good times it is hard to muster sympathy for those who are not doing as well as most. We subliminally adopt the philosophy of some forms of Protestantism that teach that wealth is a sign of God's favor, an indication of talent and hard work. It's an attitude that is not unknown even in traditional Jewish circles; think of Tevye singing "If I Were a Rich Man." We can hear through his song the voice of Sholom Aleichem's social commentary. He sings, "When

you're rich, they think you really know," an attitude we find in America today as well. If it's true, as Forbes magazine reported, that one third of the richest Americans inherited their wealth, then perhaps it is misguided to attribute to them great wisdom or accomplishment.

What remedy does Moses prescribe for the illness of "affluenza"? Remembering, but remembering of a special sort. Quite often in the Bible, we are told to remember our having been slaves, outsiders, strangers. But here the focus of our memory is slightly different. In this week's Torah portion we are told, "Remember the long way that the Eternal made you travel in the wilderness." Those 40 years were not years of accomplishment or of individual success. They were a time when the people were forced to depend on each other, and on God. When things are so good, remember the past, remember that you needed help, that your success was not a reflection of your strength or greatness. God fed and clothed you like parents care for an infant, and when Moses disappeared, you were as frightened as the toddler who screams when Mom walks out the door. How haughty can you be, when you are forced to recall the time before you were so powerful and independent.

One commentator ties this back to the *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after Meals), which we talked about earlier in our service. He writes:

Comfort and security, Moses is telling the Jewish people, may be wonderful—but they are also spiritually perilous. The temptation will be to forget God and revel in the human power over nature. Contentment can lead to arrogance. A bountiful meal, elegantly prepared, purchased with

one's own money (or grown in one's own garden), can lead to a sense of overconfidence in our power.

This is why Grace after Meals is so much longer and broader than the short blessings said before eating. It is a reminder to be grateful for all our blessings—not just food, but a healthy planet, loving parents and family, a sufficient livelihood. None of these things come to us solely as a result of our personal efforts. And it is precisely at the moment when our bellies are full and our immediate physical needs have just been satisfied that this reminder is most needed.

A final note: It was interesting to me that while the command “to remember” is meant to counter the pride that the Israelites might develop once they had a land of their own, “remember” was also the instruction for bad times. The contemporary progressive Jewish organization Teruah uses this as their slogan: “Resisting tyrants since Pharaoh.” In our Torah portion this week, the emphasis is a little different. When you encounter difficult times or frightening enemies, Moses tells the people, “Remember.” Remember that you have come up against adversaries who were strong and numerous—the Egyptians, Moabites, Ammonites, Amorites—and yet you persisted.

That memory remains with us through history, as we remember Rome and the Crusaders, the Inquisition and more modern enemies. “Remember,” Judaism teaches, that there were difficult times, but remember too that we are still here.