

Living on the edge in hard, uncertain times, or living in security and plenty: Which scenario is more fraught with danger? At first glance, we are likely to consider the first situation more perilous, but unfortunately, this has never been the case. Illustrating this, Moses once again reminds the Israelites of all they have been through. Slavery was miserable; so was the trek through the wilderness. There was hardship, uncertainty, fear of the unknown. They were pursued and attacked. They made many blunders, and many poor choices that had dire consequences. But HaShem was with them from the beginning, upholding the covenant, protecting them, feeding and clothing them, and dealing kindly with them even when provoked to the utmost by their lack of trust. No, says Moses, the real challenge does not lie behind them, but before them, and it is as true today as it was then. The real challenge is success. We see it time and time again: The struggling young novice who finally makes good forgets what it took to get there, forgets those without whose help success would not have been possible, and becomes arrogant. Power and prosperity tend to obscure the difficult past and can lead to corruption and decadence. When we struggle, we are more apt to be grateful for what we receive, but when we've arrived, we tend to take things for granted. It happens to individuals, and it happens to civilizations. Strong in adversity, complacent in abundance – what a paradox!

Moses understands human nature very well. In his final days he issues many warnings laid out clearly in choices and consequences. Because we ate from that tree back in Gan Eden, we know the difference between good and bad, right and wrong. But knowing and choosing are two very different things, both for individuals and for a people. Moses cuts right to the heart of the matter: "... and your heart grows haughty and you forget the Lord, your God, Who has brought you out of the land of Egypt ... .. and you will say to yourself, 'My strength and the power of my hand has generated this abundance'" No, we never really do it all by ourselves. Behind every "self-made" person are many other people helping in a myriad of large and small ways. And behind every great civilization are people with high ideals working together to build a society. The danger lies in forgetting how we got there – in other words, in losing our sense of gratitude.

Our Torah teaches us that we are sojourners on HaShem's earth, and we have the responsibility to use its resources wisely. If we truly understand this, we cultivate a sense of gratitude that informs all we do. Last week we read the first paragraph of our *shema yisrael*; this week's parashah contains the second paragraph. The first paragraph was addressed to each of us individually. Now, we are addressed as a group, with a warning that is as relevant today as it was then: "If you really listen and understand My commandments that I command you this day to love and Lord your God, and to serve Him with all your heart and with all your soul, I will give the rain of your land at its time ... and you will gather in your grain, your wine, and your oil. And I will give grass in your field for your livestock, and you will eat and be sated. ... Beware lest your heart be misled, and you turn away and worship strange gods ..." HaShem's earth is well able to support us if we act as its good stewards, but if we take its bounty for granted, we risk losing it all. In context, this warning pertains to the land the Israelites are about to settle, but its message is universal and timeless. The "strange gods" are rooted in prosperity: Power, acquisition regardless of the consequences, hedonism – addictive, elusive, and ultimately lethal cravings of the ego-driven who have forgotten where they came from and how they got there.

The second word of our parashah, which is also its name, is *eikev*, which means *because, as a consequence of*. Moses makes it very clear that we always reap what we sow. Security and prosperity can make us arrogant and unappreciative, or it can humble us and make us grateful for all we have. And we have so much, especially in the realm of food. Our sages devised blessings to say before we eat, but also to say afterward: *Birkat haMazon* – our four-part table grace that acknowledges HaShem's gifts of food, land, Jerusalem, and goodness. The end of the first blessing is a quote from our parashah – Chapter 8, verse 10: *v'achalta v'savata, uverachta et Adonai elohecha al ha'aretz asher natan-lach*. And you will eat and be sated, and you shall bless the Lord, your God, for the good land He has given you.

We live dangerously indeed if we let success make us haughty enough to forget how we got there. Our prayers help us to remember our origins, to remember our covenant with HaShem, and to remember to be grateful for all we have. Let us always remember to bless HaShem for blessing us in our uniquely Jewish way of expressing gratitude.

Shabbat shalom!