

THE POVERTY OF RICHES

By Rabbi David Algaze

“And you may say in your heart, ‘My strength and the might of my hand made me all this wealth.’ Then you shall remember Hashem, your God: that it was He Who gave you strength to make wealth...”(Devarim 8:17f)

How much easier it is to rely on G-d when one has nothing than it is to remember Him when we have everything! Man is prone to pray and beg his Maker when he is down and out, when his needs are not fulfilled, but as he reaches the pinnacle of wealth and comfort he soon forgets the Provider of his riches.

The experiment of the desert was to feed the people with manna from Heaven in order that they became accustomed to the idea that all provisions stem from G-d. The Torah describes this educational process in the following words, “Who feeds you manna in the wilderness...in order to afflict you in order to test you, to do good for you in your end.” (ibid. 16) Why is the giving of the manna associated with affliction? On the contrary, one would imagine that the bountiful and miraculous manna was viewed as a great blessing and relief. However, the manna had one major drawback: it was not subject to hoarding. It had to be gathered every day anew and you could not store it for the next day. One could never be sure that the manna would fall the following day unless one had faith in G-d. Only those who trusted the A-mighty were tranquil about the next day’s food. Those who lacked faith were restless and anxious every day. This is the meaning of the affliction suffered by the eaters of manna: they were never sure that the food would be there for them.

The inability to hoard, the need to hold on to faith in order to assuage their anxiety taught Israel a great lesson: all our needs are provided for by Hashem. Nothing comes to us except from Heaven. Thus, the affliction became the vehicle for their learning to trust Hashem and acknowledge the true source of all blessings. This is the meaning of the words, “to test you, to do good for you in the end.” The experiment involved some anguish, but the results would be a great good.

The opposite phenomenon can occur when the riches are in our hand, when we do not need to pray anymore because we have all we need right in the palm of our hand. We are sometimes that “man who has everything” for whom no gift is necessary and no prayer required. When Israel was in the desert, when they were parched the scorpion and the snake, there they definitely needed G-d and understood how their needs were satiated. But as they entered the fertile land of Israel, as they transitioned from a “management by miracle” by G-d to a self-management by their own powers, when people had to work to earn their livelihood and the Di-

vine Providence is hidden and not apparent, here lies the grave danger that people would attribute their success to their own intelligence or diligence alone and not to G-d’s mercies. The Torah warns us “lest you shall forget” beware of the arrogance that may infect you whereby you will come to declare glibly, “It is my power and the strength of my hand that made me this wealth” – from here we deduce that arrogance ultimately leads to the denial of G-d. (Midrash Hagadol). Arrogance is the loss of proportion in assessing one’s own capabilities. (Rav Filber, Hemdat Yamim, p. 258)

Rabbenu Nissim (Tenth Discourse) explains that the Divine Providence assigns to people different characteristics. Some are given analytical powers in order to receive wisdom, others are given the ability to amass and gather and the power to achieve. It is these gifts that give people their various degrees of success in their endeavors. The Torah does not say that G-d gives you wealth, for otherwise there would be no relationship between someone’s efforts and his success. The Torah says that G-d gives you “the power to make wealth.” Although you are the one who makes wealth, you must remember that the power that enables you to be successful is a gift from Hashem.

When one develops an insensitivity to the true source of one’s success one becomes impoverished. There is a poverty in riches, when a person loses the sense of proportion about his gifts, when arrogance consumes him, when becomes drunk with his own fortune. Many a child of wealthy people fail in life because they have not absorbed this simple truth. Many successful people live lives that are empty because they lack gratefulness and with it sensitivity and finesse. There is none as poor as he who thinks he has everything. When we lose the sense that there is a Provider, a Source of our gifts, then we are on our own and often falter and fall.

This degree of arrogance may be found in nations that were successful in battle. The Hatam Sofer (1762-1839) writes that the wars of Joshua, the battles of the Maccabees and other battles that Israel fought were full of miracles. If so, why do we have to fight at all? He answers that the reason we have to take up the sword and fight is in order that the nations of the world should not think of the Jews as weaklings. Thus, we get the world to regard us as strong and valiant. But if we begin to feel that our military success is only due to our prowess, then we may begin the slide down a chute of over self confidence and defeat. In this regard, many of the problems plaguing Israel today may ultimately be due, not to our defeats, but ironically to our success. The miraculous success of the Six-Day War, for instance, has given birth to an arrogance and self confidence that can possibly render Israel weaker and more impotent before its enemies. The poverty of riches is thus a phenomenon occurring both in our personal and national lives. The antidote to this disease is to remember: It is G-d Who gives us the power to do whatever we do. Let us not forget it.