

There's a saying in the Midrash that God provides the cure before the illness is even apparent.

That's the case in this week's Torah portion and understanding that helps us to see how the different seemingly unrelated parts of the portion, hold together.

The blessings that come towards the end of the portion, the section that Lily chanted for us this morning, are a key part of Moses's message.

Having sons and daughters, cattle and sheep, rain in its time, and security are all great gifts. But sometimes having a lot of gifts can get you into trouble. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses worries, more than once, that being in the land and enjoying all its bounty, while physically great for the Israelites, will not be so good for them morally.

Moses scolds them, "Beware lest your heart grow haughty and you forget the Eternal your God... and you say to yourselves, 'My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me.'

Moses worries that people who have everything can easily come to believe that they deserve everything they have, that they are entitled to every good thing. If everything is coming to me, I don't feel grateful when I receive it. And Moses also cautions us about another type of arrogance. Those who achieve great success - economic or otherwise - can assume that they accomplished it all themselves. They become full of pride and lose their compassion for others who are less successful.

The medicine for this affluenza that Moses is afraid the Israelites will contract when they come into the land, is the first-fruits ceremony described at the beginning of Parashat Ki Tavo. These familiar words, "My father was a wondering Aramean," that we read at the Passover seder, are actually a liturgical attempt to keep gratitude from dissipating in the face of affluence and abundance.

Now the problem is not that the Israelite farmers have given themselves credit for their own hard work but rather that they have forgotten the other factors that have played a part as well. Rabbi Shai Held in an article from

2014 brings forward a 14<sup>th</sup> century commentator, Rabbi Nissim Gerondi who addresses this issue.

R. Nissim grants that there is nothing religiously or morally problematic about acknowledging the role we ourselves play in achieving success and prosperity. Some people have been endowed with special talents - some, are intellectually gifted or have a talent for business and to some extent, then, successful people could legitimately claim to have accumulated wealth through their own talents. But what they don't remember is that they have done nothing to deserve or to earn these special talents.

According to R. Nissim, " Your raw abilities are an endowment [rather than an achievement], you must always remember " that they are not of your own making.

Remembering, every year, that our people began as landless wanderers makes it more likely that we will not take everything we have for granted.

Thus the Israelite farmer, at the moment of his greatest achievement, at the time of the harvest, was to retell the history of his people, including its enslavement and wanderings. We are reminded: "The people must keep

alive the memory of oppression and deliverance because otherwise the wonder of their possessing the land may be lost."

Further the words that the farmer is to recite deliberately blurs the line between past and present. He starts out talking about his ancestors, but uses the words "my father", no matter how many generations have gone by. And in talking about slavery, the declaration shifts to the first person plural, "the Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us". Martin Buber, reading this portion, observed: "No matter how many generations ago the people were redeemed from slavery, they have only just been liberated, and no matter how long they have dwelt in the land, they have only just arrived". Finally the prayer shifts from the plural to the singular: "Therefore I now bring the first fruits of the soil which you, O Eternal, have given me." Now this is not only the story of the Jewish people, but the story of the individual as well. As the Passover Haggadah puts it, "In every generation a person must see him or herself as if he or she herself had left Egypt."

Finally in the 11 verses of this declaration, the verb *natan*, give, is repeated seven times reminding the farmer just how much has been given *to* him rather than (just) accomplished *by* him.

The ceremony concludes by instructing the farmer to enjoy what God has given him "together with the Levite and the stranger in your midst" (26:11) - and to share a tenth of his yield with "the Levite, the stranger, the orphan, and the widow, that they may eat in your settlements, and be satisfied" (28:12). Genuine gratitude to God leads to generosity and the desire to share our blessings with others.

Deuteronomy's teaching is clear: Gratitude and generosity go hand in hand. If you are conscious of how much has been given to you, you will be open both more humble and more sensitive to the needs of others. What wonderful traits to develop in this month of Elul.

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