

Echoes of Eden

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A Recipe for Happiness

Modern man is many things, but more than anything else, modern man is privileged. Had previous generations caught a glimpse of our lives they would have been in awe, convinced that we live in utopia. So much of the drudge-work that constituted the majority of daily life in antiquity, the menial labor that made subsistence possible, has been conquered by automation. The convenience and luxury of modern life, which we often take for granted, transcend the imagination of the great thinkers of the past and put the wildest dreams of the wealthy and powerful of yesteryear to shame.

And yet, with all of this technology, with all of the ease and comfort, modern man is not happy. Are ad agencies and large corporations solely to blame? Can we attribute depression, anxiety and dysfunctionality to the billions of dollars they spend each year to make us constantly aware that we do not yet own the newest, sleekest, smallest (or largest), most powerful model? Can our malaise be merely the product of envy, or is something else missing?

Parashat Ki Tavo to a great extent deals with happiness. The opening paragraphs command the farmer, who has worked hard all year, to bring his first fruits to Jerusalem and express his thanks to God for this bounty. The prayer of thanksgiving is woven together with a brief retelling of our national history: We recall our national origins, the period of slavery, the years of wandering and homelessness. We recall a time and place

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when we were threatened, and our very survival was uncertain. This display of historical consciousness is designed to give context to our current success. Our hard work has paid off, but it was built on the experiences of the past; moreover, when contrasted with the hopelessness of the past, our current success is that much sweeter.

There is, however, another aspect to the rite of the first fruits: We are commanded to thank God for His gifts, thus recognizing a type of partnership with God. Our material success is not ours alone; it is not only our hard work and our national or historical consciousness that has allowed us to achieve. Just as we are not alone when our prospects seem bleak, so too we are not alone when we succeed, through the sweat of our brow, to build and innovate, sow and reap, invent and improve our lives.

Modern man, intoxicated with his own success, is prone to hubris. He sees himself as a self-made man, and worships his 'creator' every time he glances in the mirror. But tragically, despite all of his achievements, modern man quite often feels very much alone. Although we have at our disposal almost inconceivable tools of communication, we have lost touch with our selves. We have forgotten how to speak honestly with ourselves, and how to speak to God. The barrage of communication and information all but drowns out the sound of our inner voice, and we fall out of touch; authentic prayer is dismissed as a quaint, abandoned tradition from the past.

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Like Narcissus gazing into the water while perched on a rock, modern man no longer recalls where he came from, and his own self-absorption mesmerizes him. He is isolated, and because he has forgotten the past, he has no humility, no perspective, no context. At the same time, he jeopardizes

his connection with the future: Only when we transmit historical consciousness to our children, and live beyond the narrow confines of the present, do we stand a chance of being appreciated by our children – rather than being rejected, in turn, as a relic from the past.

The Torah gives us a formula to combat narcissism, hubris and the existential loneliness they cause – a recipe for happiness: Keep an eye on the past. Know that you are part of something much greater than yourself – a nation that has arisen through trials and tribulations. Remember where we come from. Bring God into the celebration of your success; celebrate in front of God and thank God for your good fortune. Share this perspective with your spouse, and with your children. Be generous; share your happiness and the gifts God has given you with those who are less fortunate:

And you shall rejoice in all the good that the Almighty God has given you and your household; you and the Levi, and the stranger in your midst. (Dvarim 22:11)

The recipe for happiness combines all these things: Hard work to keep you honest; historical consciousness to provide context for your success; family and community to provide perspective. Healthy communication, generosity and humility will be inevitable dividends.

For a more in-depth analysis see <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2013/08/essays-and-lectures-parashat-ki-tavo.html>