

How can we help our young people make healthy transitions?

by rabbi judah dardik

Devarim

Deuteronomy 7:12 - 11:25

Yeshayahu/Isaiah 49:14 - 51:3

Drought is on our minds, once again. In the Bay Area, municipal utilities are reminding us of increased need to conserve precious water supplies and cut unnecessary usage. Concurrently in Israel, Lake Kinneret has dropped to one of its lowest levels ever. Dry winters and drought conditions have put Israel's most significant source of fresh water in a critical state, and water authorities have posted large signs at major intersections reminding the populous of the need to monitor water usage as farms are restricted in their water allotments. Dry times are perilous times.

Our current sensitivities make two verses in this week's Torah portion incredibly difficult to understand. Right in the middle of praising Israel as a wonderful homeland for the Jewish People, the Torah distinguishes that "the land to which you are headed is not like the land of Egypt that you left, where you planted seeds and watered them [through irrigation from the river] . . . It is a land of hills and valleys; you will only be able to drink the water that falls from the heavens" (11:10-11). While Egypt has a dependable and constant source of water in the ever-flowing Nile, Israel is a land that depends on winter rains to bring water; without them it is hard and dry and cannot be farmed.

How strange! Why point out this difference between the water systems of the two countries in the context of extolling the virtues of the Promised Land? In this depiction, Israel comes off a harder land to water and in which to grow crops than Egypt. Given the choice of a land that has a constant water supply and is an easy place to make a living versus a land that risks drought each and every year, doesn't the fertile Nile Delta sound better?

Seeking insight, it could prove worthwhile to examine the first mention of people making a living in the Biblical text – Adam and Chava and the snake. Adam and Chava ate from the tree that blended knowledge of good and evil, and part of Adam's punishment is that he will need to work hard to get by. When it comes to the snake that instigated the whole situation and tempted Chava, Hashem's punishment for the snake is that it will eat dust.

Isn't that a blessing for the snake? Given the ubiquitous nature of dust, isn't a Divine declaration that one will eat that which is everywhere a good thing? In fact, the Talmud (Yoma 75A) makes precisely this point, noting this as one example of the myriad ways in which Hashem is kinder than human beings: people often take revenge on those that cross them and Hashem blesses the snake to have food everywhere!

The Sfas Emes explains that what seems to be a good thing for the snake is in fact a curse. It is true that the snake need not go anywhere to get its sustenance, and its needs are always fulfilled. Yet as a result, it never "looks up" and never relates to Hashem. Human beings have needs, and those needs incline us to seek a relationship with Hashem. It is this connection that constitutes the ultimate blessing. The snake's material needs are cared for so plentifully that it misses out on the chance to connect to the infinite.

Israel is praised as a place that is dependant on rain, because it is a land that encourages a dynamic spiritual relationship with Hashem. True, this creates a challenge and raises the propensity for drought. However, it concurrently allows less room for distance or slacking in the quest for connection. But we have never been a people seeking the comfort of the easy road. Our role and destiny has long been to struggle through the temporal in pursuit of that which is elevated.

Rabbi Judah Dardik is the spiritual leader at Oakland's Beth Jacob. He can be reached at rabbi@bethjacoboakland.org.