

B”H
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The Torah Life of Moderation ***When Will We Ever Learn?***

By Rabbi Ariel Bar Tzadok
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***“This then is the way of Torah:
eat your bread with salt, drink water in measure, sleep on the floor,
live a life of difficulty, and place your efforts in the Torah.
If you do this happy will you be and it will be well with you.
Happy will you be in this world
and it will be well with you in the World To Come.”***

Pirkei Avot 6:4

I have once heard it said that the 20th century can be summed up as follows: one half of the world was dying from starvation while the other half of the world was dying from problems due to overeating. It is the nature of imbalance to be the root cause of all the world’s ills, both on a collective and individual level.

One of the great benefits of living a life in accordance with G-d’s law, is that by doing so one reaps the rewards of psychological balance. It is this inner state of balance that eventually leads to states of balance in all other areas of life. Once the insides are secure and aligned, one’s outside world and all the things in it will soon follow suit. This is the promise of Torah and the experience of the countless ones who observe it.

One of the wise words of advice our Rabbis have passed down to us is for us to maintain a sense of detachment with all of our possessions in this world. We are to live in a psychological state that recognizes the transitory nature of things. We are thus to limit our involvement with the material things of this world. This is by no means to suggest that Torah teaches us to live a life of austerity, for this is not true. The Torah is teaching us however, that true balance in life requires one to view one’s possessions for what they are, transitory items, in our possession only temporarily. With this attitude at the center of the Jewish consciousness, all the gains or losses that one experiences in life, one recognizes them for what they are – the will of G-d.

When our Rabbis advise us to eat our bread with salt, to drink our water in moderation, to sleep on the floor and to live a life of discomfort, they are teaching us to detach from the opposites of all these. Overeating, indulgent drinking, all too comfortable living quarters and a life and ease and luxury will cause a soul to forget his/her spiritual origins. In essence, one who is attached to the things of this world is like one who is on a merry-go-

round, which is spiraling extremely fast. One has to hold on for dear life or be thrown asunder to certain peril. Simply put, even the wealthiest of individuals must work long and hard to maintain their good fortunes. Many of the rich never have a moment's peace because of the worry they have over all their possessions.

Yet, if one were to choose between riches and poverty the choice is simple and obvious. Anyone choosing poverty is a pious fool and a liar. Poverty is not a sign of blessing from G-d. Although many of the great Talmudic Sages were pitifully poor, this was still the exception to the rule and not the norm. Throughout the Torah, all our Patriarchs were fantastically wealthy men. Yet, this wealth did not disturb their state of balance between the physical and spiritual worlds. Indeed, although our fathers were all wealthy, they were also nomads and shepherds. They lived in the desert amongst the sheep. Indeed, the number of their sheep defined their wealth. Nonetheless, living among stinking sheep in the middle of a hot desert is not my idea of an affluent life style.

The nature of wealth, affluence, and abundance is completely subjective to one's culture, environment, and mostly, one's own personal point of view. One man's wealth is another man's poverty. Therefore, the concepts of eating bread with salt, water in moderation and the rest must also be understood within a cultural context of relative norms.

Regardless of whatever culture one lives in, the advice of our holy Rabbis has been consistent. One is to walk the middle path through life in all endeavors. One is not to be overly wealthy or overly poor. One should not over-eat, nor should one under-eat. The details of these matters are clearly defined by RaMBaM (Maimonides) in his Laws of Personal Development (Hilkhos Deot). These laws which detail how to live a life of moderation are an integral part of Torah and of equal importance with all the other mitzvot. One cannot call oneself religious because one keeps kosher, yet violates the Shabat. Indeed, one cannot call oneself religious, observe the Shabat, keep kosher, pray three times a day, and yet ignore the Laws of Personal Development! A life without moderation is not a life of Torah!

In our many sins, for the last fifty years, life for Jews in Western countries, especially the United States has been anything but moderate. Jews, religious and secular alike, as a group, have been some of the most affluent and wealthiest citizens of these countries. Their wealth and affluence has led the majority to live lifestyles not in harmony with the spirit of moderation taught by the Torah. This is even true with regards to many in the religious communities.

Many Jews today worldwide are intoxicated with the American concepts of consumerism and the desire for possessions. This addiction to material things has led to a gross imbalance in the collective psyche of the Jewish people. All too many Jews have more of a love for their possessions that they do for G-d. Unfortunately, this is also true of many members of the religious community. Moderation is a concept subject to individual interpretation. Everyone calls themselves a moderate, in their life styles and

philosophies, all the while practicing some very gross and disgusting extremes. The number of hypocrites among us abound.

All too many Jews today are intoxicated with Western culture just as the Jews in the days of the Exodus were intoxicated with Egyptian culture. Many Jews in Egypt did not survive to make the Exodus with Moshe Rabbeynu. A large number died in the Plague of Darkness. G-d smote them because they were unwilling to leave Egypt. These imbalanced souls did not want to experience the freedom that would come to them by living in the desert. They wanted to continue in the settled and stable lifestyle that Egyptian culture offered. They chose Egypt over Israel. They rejected the insecurities of freedom to embrace the security of slavery.

Nothing has changed in all these years. Still countless Jews refuse to come live in our Holy Land of Israel because of their desire to maintain their present state of affluence. Today we are not imprisoned by an individual Pharaoh. Instead, we are imprisoned by our credit card debt, our mortgages, our other bills, and our jobs. Today we are slaves to our affluent life styles. To give up this affluence and accept a radically altered lifestyle some people fear worse than death. What fools they be who crave their possessions over their own souls.

In light of modern event, with the advent of what can soon turn into world war, the Jews in Western countries had better start to think long and hard about what the future holds for them. The enemies of Western Culture are poised, ready, and most able to strike deep into Western Culture and to cripple its economy. Yes, Western Jews had better think long and hard about where their priorities lie and what action they are taking to manifest those priorities.

Americans especially love to flash around their money and their wealth. They like to show off how good G-d has been to them. Yet, I am sure that G-d Himself does not like the showing off. I am sure that He will put a stop to it, in His own Divine way, and in the not too distant future. Yes, Western Jews must think hard about the future, but they better not think for too long. We may not have that much time left. The Jews in Egypt and Germany learned this the hard way. Let us pray that in the history books of one hundred years from now we will not have to add the American Jews to the list of those Jews who perished because they learned the truth too late.