



Light of Torah

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Feasting and sobriety

At times Deuteronomy appears to resemble a formidable list of rules (e.g., chapters 11-16). This is Moses' last chance to impress upon the Israelites their responsibilities before entering the promised land. They have a choice: listen to God's teachings and be blessed, or turn from God and be cursed (11:26).

Yet amidst the dire warnings, we also hear verses like these:

"Together with your households, you shall feast there before the Lord your God, happy in all the undertakings in which the Lord your God has blessed you" (12:7).

"And you shall feast there, in the presence of the Lord your God, and rejoice with your household" (14:26).

"You shall hold a festival for the Lord your God...for the Lord your God will bless all your crops and all your undertakings, and you shall have nothing but joy" (16:15).

These are commands to gather the family for a joyous feast. How often do we think of loyalty to God in terms of feasting? Elsewhere, in the context of ritual prescriptions, the Israelites are commanded to "eat to your heart's content" (12:21), to "spend the money on anything you want—cattle, sheep, wine or other intoxicant, or anything you may desire" (14:26), and to hold annual festivals (16:1-

17) while God provides secure dwellings (12:10), enlargement of their territory (12:20), and countless blessings.

Perhaps we are reminded that covenantal relationship with God is not all hard work! Yes, God is unafraid to make demands of his people. But God also provides, has the people's interests at heart, and some of the divine demands are actually delightful!

"For you are a people consecrated to the Lord your God; the Lord your God chose you from among all other peoples on earth to be His treasured people" (14:2).

God asks much of his people, but only because his people are treasured beyond belief, and because such demands bring about a just world where the stranger, the orphan and widow find safety (cf. 16:11).

Deuteronomy invites us to dwell on God's abundant blessings. Yes, the consequences of rejecting God are dire, but the blessings of cleaving to God are lifegiving beyond measure.

We are tempted to disbelieve this, for life is difficult, sometimes brutal. Bad things happen to good people; evil can seem to prevail. Even religion can be experienced as a weapon of oppression, or reduced to loveless 'duty.' Yet another testimony prevails through generations of those who live by God's Word: God's blessings are real. They can be celebrated with smiles

and laughter, music and dancing, feasting and lovemaking, prayer and passion. Thus Judaism speaks of 'Simchat Torah,' 'the joy of Torah,' and Christianity speaks of the 'gospel,' 'good news.'

Even so, in the midst of texts which call for feasting and celebration, our eye is drawn to a verse commanding the Israelites to eat the 'bread of affliction' or 'bread of distress' (16:3). What is the power of this verse, placed as it is amidst the description of Israel's festivals? We also find the sages asking: why does the text here twice command that we rejoice during the festival of Sukkot (16:11,14) but omits this command with regard to the festival of Passover? An explanation offered in the midrashic collection *Yalkut Shimoni*: "On account of the fact that [during the exodus] the Egyptians died." The midrash immediately cites the Book of Proverbs (24:17): "If your enemy falls, do not exult; if he trips, let your heart not rejoice."

Think about it: Unless we remember the taste of slavery, can we truly feast on our freedom? In what ways do your family festivities retain an appropriate place for sober recollection of past and present struggles?

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2003); Leibowitz, *Studies in Devarim* (NY, n.p.d.).
Scripture: NJPS.