



## The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

### Ha'azinu: The Rich Trap

Ha'azinu tells a story of a nation created and nurtured by God and brought to a land of plenty:

He set him atop the highlands, to feast on the yield of the earth;  
He fed him honey from the crag, and oil from the flinty rock,  
Curd of kine and milk of flocks with the best of lambs,  
And rams of Bashan, and he-goats with the very finest wheat. (32:13-14)

But once they become wealthy and comfortable they forget God who gave them their good fortune:

Jeshurun [- the people of Israel] grew fat and kicked!  
You grew fat and gross and coarse  
He forsook the God who made him  
And spurned the Rock of his support. (32:15)

Does wealth stimulate religious rejection?

Rabbi Hirsch comments:

[These verses are] the quintessence of the whole of Jewish history. In suffering, the Jewish people have mostly proved themselves splendid. But it has seldom been able to stand good fortune.

#### **So please discuss:**

- Is Rabbi Hirsch correct? Have the Jewish people remained more faithful to their traditions in times of hardship than times of plenty?
- Why might it be that living comfortably leads a person or a society to de-prioritise God?
- If you think this is true, what is it about wealth or material comfort that leads to a lowering of intensity for religion?
- We live in a world where most Jews are relatively comfortable. Do you identify a connection between financial comfort and assimilation?

We must be careful of generalizations. We are fortunate to live in comfortable times. Often financial plenty means that shuls and schools are built, charities are funded, and people can afford to educate their children in Jewish environments, attend Jewish camps, attend Yeshiva and the like. In many circles, there is no contradiction whatsoever between material comfort and religious observance.

And yet, Rabbi Hirsch explanation of our verse's metaphor of Israel becoming "fat" and rejecting God as a distortion of priorities, a situation in which the Jewish mission has been traded for a higher standard of living:

The sense of the passage is: - the more strengthening, the fatter the food which is given to the body is, the more should the surplus be used up in energy and work, the higher should the activity and achievements be. Then the person masters the abundance and remains bodily and mentally healthy and fit, and by his greater achievements increases his moral worth. But if he neglects to use it, then the surplus material stores itself up in his body, he becomes corpulent, obese, and instead of mastering the abundance, he, his real spiritual active self, becomes overcome by the fat, and sinks.

That is the history of Israel. It did not use the abundance and surplus with which it was blessed to increased spiritual and moral achievements, not the fuller carrying out of its mission. Its moral improvement did not keep pace with its material good fortune.

The Mussar classic, Mesillat Yesharim, likewise warns that as our standard of living rises, we devote more and more resources to sustaining that high comfort level, which frequently drains resources from other pursuits.

Once a person habituates himself to a certain standard of food and drink, if one time he cannot sustain his habit, it will greatly pain and disturb him. Due to this, he presses ahead in the rush of business, toil and acquiring possessions in order that his table be set as he wishes. From there he is further drawn to wrongdoing ... and goes away from the divine service, and from Torah study and prayer.

But if from the beginning he had not allowed himself to be drawn after these pleasures, he would have spared himself from all this.

Sometimes, we are driven to earn more to sustain a certain lifestyle. But if we adopted more modest habits, we might find we have more money for charity, more time to devote to Torah study etc. As we become middle class, have we lost our ideological edge?

Mishna Avot (6:4) suggests that a true Torah scholar will subsist on the simplest of lifestyles:

This is the way of the Torah: Bread and salt you will eat, measured water you will drink, on the ground you will sleep, a life of suffering you will live, and in

the Torah you will labor. If you do this, 'You are fortunate and it is good for you' (Psalms 128:2). 'You are fortunate' — in this world; 'and it is good for you' — in the World to Come.

Is this for everyone? Certainly not! But the spartan lifestyle has frequently been the way of passionate academics, scholars and artists, who immersed themselves in their work to the exclusion of all else. A higher lifestyle certainly diffuses our energies and diverts our attention.

How does a person find the correct balance of correct priorities alongside a reasonable and comfortable standard of living?

This is a tremendous challenge that occupies my thoughts frequently.

As we are about to leave our brick and mortar homes for the simple environment of the Sukka, trading our material security for God-engineered protection, we might want to use Parashat Haazinu to ask ourselves about the pros and cons, the gain and loss of living in a material world.

Shabbat Shalom and Chag Sameach!