EQEB: The perils of material success

40 years after leaving Egypt and slavery the children of Israel are ready to enter into the promised land. There is one small problem, however. The land is not empty. In fact, there are seven large nations and dozens of scattered tribes and peoples against whom we must fight and prevail. Because this land needs to be conquered. This is not a small challenge. Remember that 40 years ago the fear of fighting paralyzed an entire generation that ended up dying in the desert. Now, Moshe addresses the new generation. He gives them a long speech, which occupies most of the book Debarim. What is the content of this speech? Normally, in these circumstances, you would have expected the leader of the army to harangue his soldiers and motivate them to fight. Normally, the leader would use some strong sounding phrases like “Kill or die”, or “Fredoooom”, or “fight till the end”, etc, etc. Or some unusual act to demonstrate that they need to win, as Julius Cesar did burning the ships when his army was about to invade Britannia.

But rather surprisingly in his speech Moshe Rabbenu is not concerned with the details of the battle. He almost does not mention anything practical about the imminent war… Moshe is not worried about military strategies or the fighting spirit of his soldiers. Moshe knows that this war will be won, because HaShem promised so. And because the Almighty will fight alongside Israel.

What does concern Moshe then? The aftermath of victory.

Moshe is concerned about the spiritual effects of success and material wealth.

Israel is a rich and fertile land, with material surplus

(Debarim 8: 7-9) *"[Israel is …] a land with streams and springs of waters, that water the valleys and the hills; a land of wheat and barley, vineyards and fig trees, pomegranates, olive oil and honey, a land where bread is not scarce, [and a land] where you will lack nothing "*

Moshe, unlike any other political leader in history, fears the spiritual consequences of stability and wealth. He fears that once the people settle in their new mansions and rich lands, they would forget who they are, and who they should be …

(Debarim 8: 10-19) *"[Once you settle in the land and] you have eaten, and you are satisfied … beware not to forget HaShem your God, and abandon His commandments … lest your herds and flocks multiply, and your silver and gold increase, and all you have abound … and then, your heart might become proud, and you might forget HaShem your God, who brought you out of Egypt, the land of slavery …. and then, you would persuade yourself saying, 'It was my own power and the might of my own hand that produced this wealth for me' … and when you forget HaShem your God, you would seek other gods and you would bow down to them"*

There is a psychological and spiritual chain reaction which begins with wealth and ends with a special form of idolatry.

1. Wealth and affluence can lead man to forget God. This is a phenomenon which, unfortunately, is not uncommon. The more we suffer poverty, disease and tragedy, the more we must remember God. And vice versa.

2. When we forget HaShem, we become arrogant. "Everything I have, I achieved it by myself, with my own efforts."

3. This dysfunctional perception leads to (or is a form of) 'aboda zara (idolatry), which in this context must be understood as "egolatry" or self-worshipping. Human nature does not tolerate emptiness. And when an individual removes HaShem from his or her life, usually he would replace the

Divine with his own ego.

Now, we can finally understand that waging war against the enemy does not worry Moshe. Moshe's great concern is the battle between man and his own arrogance. The Tora warns us that material success can be dangerous. Because once you do not "need" anymore to beg God for bread and water, you are very close to forget and ignore Him.

Now, what is the solution to the moral challenge of wealth and success? Should we give up the aspiration of material well-being, to not risk a spiritual collapse? In fact, the Tora presents "wealth" as a Divine blessing ("berakha" literally means "abundance") to which we are entitled to aspire. And if we win our bread honestly, the Tora does not impose us to make a voluntary vow of poverty.

We read in the Shema 'Israel, we must love (= keep in mind .., think of…) HaShem, our God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our possessions. We must have HaShem in mind by rereading these words every day, day and night. We must repeat this message to our children. And place it in front of our hearts, and as a crown on our heads. And have it in writing, as a permanent reminder, in each one of the doors through which we enter and go out, every day of our lives.

The solution of the Tora to the conflict "wealth > pride" is not to avoid wealth but to prevent "oblivion". The Jewish antidote to forgetfulness is the permanent study of Tora and the fulfillment of its Mitsvot.