

**SERMON Beha'alotcha**

Rabbi David Edleson, Temple Sinai, S. Burlington, VT June 21, 2019

**BODY AND SOUL**

In our Torah Portion this week, there is lots of drama. Moses melts down and becomes a drama queen. Aaron and Miriam turn against Moses and God becomes a drama queen. But perhaps the greatest drama is the people's obsession on getting some meat to eat.

Here is what the portion says, from the book of Numbers:

*The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!"*

There is much to unpack here. The people, having just left Sinai and the transcendent experience of receiving Torah, are now surviving off Manna, and they are missing the meat and protein they used to eat in Egypt.

Anyone who has watched "Naked and Afraid" has seen this happen.

I can relate. I really enjoy eating meat, and when I've been in India and eating only rice and vegetables for several months, I begin dreaming of steak, and then all the food in front of me, no matter how delicious, seems a betrayal.

So I get their grumbling!

But if we look closer, the whole thing starts with a small group in the camp, the "riffraff" who first feel the craving, but almost immediately, all the Israelites begin weeping and whining for meat. The people had enough food, but once a few started to name something they lacked, everyone was all in. Long before the days of Twitter and Facebook, there were memes and bots and flash mobs. Humans are hardwired with a built-in social media. We are susceptible to group-think; the most individualistic group of people can quickly become a mob.

In our Torah Portion, God blows a gasket. God says, basically, "You want some meat. I'll give you some meat!"

It reads:

*Purify yourselves for tomorrow and you shall eat meat, for you have kept whining before the LORD and saying, 'If only we had meat to eat! Indeed, we were better off in Egypt!' The LORD will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and repulses you. For you have rejected Adonai who is right here, whining and saying, 'Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!'"*

Then the winds shift and giant flocks of quail fly over the camp and drop to the ground. It's like a scene from Chernobyl! But they keep coming, until they are wading hip-deep through dead quail. They try to gather them, dry them, eat them, but they start getting sick, so that with the quail bone still in their mouths and the meat stuck in their teeth, they drop dead – not unlike the quail.

It is a scene from a horror movie. But in many ways, it is a horror movie we are living in. They are being drowned by stuff they suddenly craved but didn't need. It is piling up around them. It is killing them, but still they consume until they drop. As a culture, we are drowning in stuff we want but don't need, spurred on by the riffraff of advertisers in our midst, and by our need to keep up and appear successful. The internet has put all the stuff a click away, and for a while, it makes us happy.

I just ordered some new short sleeve shirts for my trip to Israel, and I can tell you, when they arrived and I opened them and tried them on – well – I was like a kid at that *other* holiday that happens around Chanukkah.

Stuff is fun, and it fills that empty place within for a moment. But we need to begin to ask ourselves what the empty place is about in the first place. Why, with all this stuff, do we so often feel such a lack?

I think some of it is being overworked. Some of it is the erosion of social connections. Some of it is a need to seem to 'on top of thing', so neat, so together.

But some of it is spiritual. Just because we are skeptics, just because we are scientific and critical, doesn't mean we don't have a spiritual self that needs to be nurtured and fed.

In the Torah, they are focused on their physical desires. We also live in a society that is very physically focused. We are busy running, going to the gym, staying in shape, watching our diets, going to the doctor, going to yoga or Pilates, or Zumba. Are we giving our spiritual selves that sort of attention? A richer spiritual life can help us distinguish between what we want and what we need.

As a planet, we are drowning in the detritus of this emptiness that is masquerading as fullness. It is coming out our noses. It is killing us. As Americans, we might be part of that riffraff that gets it going.

There is another part of our Torah portion that seems unrelated. Our Torah portion begins with instructions on lighting the Menorah in the tabernacle, and it says we should turn the lamps so that they shine toward the center of the Menorah. That doesn't seem to make sense. Should they shine out into the sanctuary? But the Hebrew seems to say that you turn all the lamps toward the central lamp.

There is much commentary about this, but one from Sforno, an Italian rabbi from the 15<sup>th</sup> century stands out to me. He writes:

*The mussar, allegorical lesson conveyed by the lights of the menorah is us that only by the "right" side representing preoccupation with eternal values, life in the future, working together with the "left" side which represents the concerns with physical life on our planet, will we be able to attain our purpose on earth.*

We must tend to both body and soul, not one or the other. Of course, Sforno was pointing out that being only focused on Torah, on study, on spirituality kept people who did so from fulfilling their purpose as human beings. As Pirkei Avot puts it so well – *"ein kemach, ein torah. No bread, no Torah."*

Today, it seems that for most of us, the opposite is true. *"Yesh kemach, ein Torah."* We are so focused on our physical lives, our jobs, our errands, our toys – that we don't set aside enough time to also feed our spirits.

Shabbat is given to us to provide that time. Time set aside for spirit: for being, not for doing. But it is so hard for us as Americans to actually set aside that time. It takes effort. It means letting go of some things we have convinced ourselves we want in order to give ourselves something we deeply need.

Judaism doesn't ask us to choose the spiritual or the physical. The rabbis are deeply suspicious of asceticism, or giving up pleasure and physical life to pursue a purely religious life. They are very clear the key is in finding balance. We must balance the two if our light is to truly shine fully.

Ken Y'hi Ratzon