

**Parshat Beshalah
January 11, 2014
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Let's study a little Torah.

What was in the Ark of the Covenant that traveled with the children of Israel in the wilderness and became the Holy of Holies around which the ancient Temple was centered? 10 commandments... broken shards of the 1st set of commandments - anything else? Look at page 418 in your Chumashim - ch 16:31.

So there was a jar of *mana* that was also kept in the Ark - very interesting. What is this *mana*? First a little historical perspective - turn back to p. 414 - Chapter 16 as the footnote informs us begins six weeks after the Exodus. Important to remember the context: seven weeks ago - they were slaves - six weeks ago witnessed some of the greatest miracles in human history - culminating in the miracle at the sea - and now just six short weeks after all that we read: 16:2 - don't you just love that verse? Don't you just love this people? Jews are a tough crowd to please. Talk about what have you done for me lately!

Anyway - the people's grumbling prompts God to respond with one of my favorite Biblical devices: *manna*. What exactly is *mana*? How will it be distributed to the people? What are the instructions? Jewish people are not very good at following instructions - any other examples of this? (Garden of Eden) Moses striking the rock; Building the Golden calf..) Do you think God had this plan, this *mana* thing in mind all the time - or was it just a quick response to their grumbling?

Much has been written about *mana*. One midrash suggests that it was magical - tasted like anything you wanted it to taste like.. There is a naturalist who has written that it was a natural product found on shrubbery that grew in the wilderness - part of the school that believes all the miracles in the bible can be explained naturally - I do not subscribe to that school.

But we can leave this all to the realm of speculation - not essential to understanding the true point of *mana*. The Israelites worried how they would survive in the wilderness - *mana* was the miraculous, God given solution to that problem! After *mana* - no need to worry. God would provide. This God who had so successfully and so miraculously brought them from slavery to freedom, who had helped them escape the clutches of Pharaoh, who had split the sea and defeated Pharaoh's mighty army - this God was with them now as they begin their long journey in the wilderness. *Mana* was much more than food - it was a sign, from heaven that God was still with them, that God would be with them and they would journey together to the Promised Land.

So *mana* became the symbol of God's protecting care for His people. So much so that it along with the 10 commandments merited a place in the sacred Ark of the Covenant. Now it is clear why the 10 Commandments were there - after all these 10 Commandments symbolized God's word, the ethical and moral foundation upon which all future society would be based. But the *mana*? What was so important about this *mana* that it too merited such an exalted position in the Sacred Ark of the Covenant?

Let's look closer at the mana rules. They were simple - but it appears as simple as they were - they were beyond the capabilities of the Israelites to follow.

Rule # 1 –p. 416 ch 16:16 ff - take enough for one day -people took more – don't try and keep it overnight – but they did

Rule # 2 - v. 23 ff on Friday you can take more - it won't spoil on shabbat as it does on other days - don't want you to gather on shabbat

I find this a fascinating lesson about human nature. Most of us today, like our ancestors so long ago, still want too much of the wrong things and too little of the right things. In the realm of physical needs we are insatiable. We can never have enough, we are never satisfied and we keep trying to gather more and more. In the realm of spiritual needs almost anything is enough and very little becomes too much.

Physical needs: we have many appetites. How often do we get into trouble because we don't know how to say enough? Enough food - we are unable to push ourselves away from the table - whole industries devoted to weight loss - articles written about how are children are overweight - never has American been more overweight than 2014. How often do we get into trouble because of our other appetites? Sexual appetites, or our appetite for wealth - our inability today - like that of our ancestors long ago - to say - enough!!

We must learn how to be content when we have enough for our needs. That was lesson # 1 of the mana. Why should we desire for more than enough? This is clearly a very strange quirk in human nature that was first revealed in this morning's Torah reading. We are part of an animal species that unlike all the other animal species - is never satisfied. We make wealth a tool for all the wrong purposes. We use it to establish our status. So the car we drive is not a mode of transportation but a symbol of our place in society, as is the home in which we live, the vacations we take. and the clothes we wear. We exploit these simple things and transform them into weapons for power and pleasure.

There is a Governor in New Jersey who has gotten himself in a lot of trouble – precisely over this issue. Now to be fair, at this point it is not clear whether it was the Governor himself or someone very high up in his inner circle – in time we will know – but someone became intoxicated with their power. It was not enough that they would win the Governorship by one of the largest margins in NJ history – no – there was this mayor in Ft. Lee who did not support them – so he had to be taught a lesson. Yes, this is indeed a very interesting quirk in human nature – first revealed in today's torah portion – but one that played out over and over again down to our own day This desire for more than enough, this inability to be satisfied when you have enough – enough power, enough wealth, enough pleasure – *g'nuk* – enough! But we seem incapable of saying “enough”. How sad.

The *mana* was to be a constant reminder to place reasonable limits to our desires, and to realize that the accumulation of worldly goods as an end in itself leads to corruption and decay. God provides for His children. But just enough for your needs. If you have food, use it to feed yourself and your family. Wealth – provide for those who need it. Power – use it to build a life. But do not seek to hoard these things. Do not gather more than you need. Do not seek security for the future in that which has no guarantee of permanence. Too much of any of these things will lead to corruption and decay.

And as we must limit the amount of physical goods we desire, we must also limit the time we devote to acquiring them. We should have higher desires, higher motivations that occupy our time and efforts in life.

How many times have I heard: "Rabbi I wish I could come to shul this shabbat but I just don't have the time! Not having time is in and of itself a status symbol in our society - I'd love to - but I just don't have the time - I am such a busy person - I just don't have the time- no time for shul - for vacations with the family - to attend the school plays.

And our disease has spread to our children - who like us have become too busy. "Rabbi I would love to send my kids to Hebrew School - but they don't have the time" "We would love to come to shul - but we are so busy" We recently started a wonderful program where we invite our young people to celebrate the anniversary of their Bar or Bat Mitzvah by coming back to shul and having an aliyah and we make a bit of a fuss over them. I have a response from one of our parents – it is a message on my voice mail – I kept it – as the parent thanks me for this very kind offer but, "I'm afraid we can't find a single Shabbat for little Johnny to come to shul – rabbi he is just so busy!"

So busy with what??? We are busy being busy.

Harold Kushner wrote a book: *"When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough. The Search for a Life That Matters."* Chapter one is titled: "Was there something I was supposed to do with my life?"

Never has there been a generation more physically blessed than ours - never. We have more than our ancestors could ever have dreamed possible - imagine if they would have had WAZE back then. What is Waze you ask? It is an Israeli developed GPS navigation app for your phone – you can carry it in your pocket! Can you imagine if Moses would have had Waze? They would never have spent 40 years in the wilderness. Yet, we, for all our stuff, we still can't find our way.

For all our blessings - our pre-occupation with our physical appetites have - like the torah warned us so long ago - turned into a curse. Today we eat better; sleep better; play better; enjoy better than ever before - so why are so many of us so unhappy - so unfulfilled??

When you have all that you want, when most of us who sit in this beautiful sanctuary have so much more than enough - it is possible - we now understand - to still be a very unhappy person.

Have you ever watched a painter paint, or a writer write? The painter sits very, very close to his or her easel. The actual work is very minute and very up close – but if you watch them ever now and then they have to sit back and regain a sense of perspective – ever see this gesture – (stretch out arm and sight through the thumb) - what is that? Why does the painter do that? What happens if they don't do that – the painting will get out of kilter and be ruined.

A writer does the same thing. Josh have you ever watched your mom write? Every now and then she has to just stop and think – you can't write and write and write endlessly. You have to stop, think, re-align yourself, get perspective. Otherwise you will soon just be writing gibberish.

The stopping is as importance as the going. Arthur Schnabel was one of the greatest pianists of the 20th century, whose interpretations of Beethoven were so prized that Schoenberg said of

him, "Schnabel invented Beethoven!" When he was once interviewed about his exceptional talent he remarked: "The notes I handle no better than many pianists. But the pauses between the notes – *ah* that is where the art resides!"

Yes, the pauses between the notes, - that is indeed where the art resides. We Jews have a name for that pause – we call it Shabbat. Shabbat is the pause that makes life possible.

Mana was to be collected for six days – and not on one. The stopping was as important as the collecting. This is a truth too many of us have forgotten in our never-ending striving for wealth and power. *Mana* was given an exalted position - a place of honor – to be stored in the Holy Ark of the Covenant as a reminder that these things were a means to an end – not an end in and of themselves.

This is something that the crew in New Jersey forgot. But before we judge them too harshly, they are in good company – for most of us are as guilty as them. They had more than enough power – but did not know when, did not know how to stop. But then again neither do we. When will we learn that acquiring more than enough stuff does not make you happy. Pleasures and self-indulgence do not bring more contentment when you have more than enough – in fact they bring you less – they cause decay and destruction.

We humans need things. That is why one of the first things God provided was *mana*. We need food and we need clothes and we need power and we need respect. But we need more than these things. Once we have enough of these we need something beyond food and pleasures. There is a need for the realm of the spiritual, creative life - which is symbolized by Shabbat.

Mana was placed in the Ark – but so was Shabbat. This is the day that provides a physical time out for the sake of soul pursuits. It gives us the time and space to attend to that which we neglect during our all too busy weeks. Unfortunately most of us are as clueless today as our ancestors were 3,000 years ago in the wilderness of Sinai.

Remember the lesson of the *mana* - there is one day every week which you will not find any stuff on the ground - so do not try and gather any stuff - for one day. And use that one-day for the improvement of your soul and your life. Remember the lesson of the *mana*.