

**Lengthening the Soul
Parashat Hukat
Drash by Angela Brown**

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Beth Chayim Chadashim
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A couple of months ago, when I asked Rabbi Lisa if I could give a drash sometime this summer, I told her, "It doesn't matter which Torah portion it is. I like the random aspect of it." I figured if I picked a favorite portion, or one that was fairly comprehensible, I'd be cheating myself out of working--and thinking--hard. Well, when she said July 11 was open, I agreed and then I looked up the parsha, which, to me, is utterly confounding. "Oh, great," I thought. "What am I going to say about the parsha in which people are purified when the ashes of a red heifer are sprinkled on them, Miriam dies with no fanfare, Moses strikes a rock and G-d (in my opinion) is overly harsh in Moses' punishment, G-d sends down fiery serpents who injure and kill hundreds of Israelites, and then many of the Israelites are healed when they look at a biting bronze snake statue called Nehushtan? This is really crazy." Then I flipped ahead to next week's portion and thanked my lucky stars I didn't have to write about the talking donkey.

The last time I gave a drash was almost a year ago. I drashed on the "Choose Life" portion in Deuteronomy, which I was really happy about, because it's such an affirmative, positive parsha. But this time, ironically--or maybe not so ironically--I've got the death portion. In fact, much of the Book of Numbers, in which this parsha appears, is filled with death, and much of it is at the hand of G-d.

In last week's portion, for example, Korah, a Levite, leads a rebellion with Datan and Aviram against Moses. As punishment for this insurrection, G-d opens up the earth, which swallows the three men, and then a fire issues from G-d and consumes the 250 chieftains who assisted in the rebellion. Following this, many of the Israelites assemble against Moses and Aaron, and G-d sends forth a plague, which kills nearly 15,000 of them. Only when Aaron steps forward and stands between the piles of the dead and those still living is the plague halted.

In the portion before that, a man collects wood on the Sabbath and G-d commands his death by stoning.

And just a few chapters earlier, we've got the Israelites who complain about having to eat manna and ask for meat. G-d, upon hearing their bickering, says something to the effect of "They want meat? I'll give 'em meat till it's coming out of their nostrils." At that point, G-d floods the area with quail for many square miles and several feet deep. When the Israelites are filling themselves up with the meat, G-d strikes them down, killing thousands of people. Although many assume that the Israelites gorge themselves to death, Rabbi Lisa suggested one night in Torah study that G-d strikes them down precisely because G-d assumed the meat would eventually become a revulsion to the Israelites, but the Israelites' hunger was never quelled; their craving persisted. So G-d destroyed them.

For some reason, this portion--out of all the portions in Torah--is one of my very favorites. I can't explain it. I can't stand war movies, films in which masses of people are killed. I don't even kill spiders in my apartment. If I actually witnessed this scene in real life--thousands of people eating their way through miles of quail--I'd be horrified. And yet the image is so powerful, evoking every sense: sight, smell, sound, touch, taste. It truly is one of the most astounding passages in the entire Torah. And yet it is so ugly, so abhorrent--and at the hand of G-d.

In this week's parsha, there are many beautiful moments: the gushing forth of water from a rock at Meribah, the mourning of the Israelites when Aaron dies, the lovely song of the Israelites when G-d gives them water at Beer. But there's also much ugliness, so much death it's overwhelming: the deaths of Miriam and Aaron, the deaths of throngs of Israelites who are attacked by G-d's fiery snakes, the deaths of multitudes of Canaanites and Amorites and the total annihilation of their cities by the Israelites.

On Thursday nights during Torah study at BCC, we end each class by picking the verse of the week, which appears in the seat bulletin on Friday nights. We're always very careful to choose something inspiring or affirming. Sometimes, especially during Leviticus, this can be a challenge, but we're usually successful. So far, to my knowledge, we've avoided choosing any verse about leprosy, the various birds of prey G-d forbids us to consume, or the splashing of sacrifice blood upon the altar in the Tent of Meeting. Almost every class, though, someone will make a joke like, "Oh, here's a good one about the killing of the Egyptian firstborns. Let's use that." We all kind of giggle nervously and look at each other like "Yeah, right. That'd go over well at Shabbat services. That's really uplifting."

Other times, when we're discussing a Torah portion in which G-d is especially angry, jealous, or violent, most of us get a little uneasy and say things like, "This is a troubling portion" or "I don't understand why G-d's doing this."

Often in class when I have to read aloud a long involved passage about sacrifice--with in-depth detail about what to do with the blood and the entrails and the bones--I read as quickly as possible, and then sigh expressively at the end; it makes me uncomfortable. And I must admit that often I completely zone out during these long passages regarding the sacrifice of animals. (Thank G-d the rabbi's not here tonight.)

I'm nearing the end of my second year of Torah study at BCC. Last year I remember shuddering a lot more at the death and destruction in Torah than I've done this year. Maybe I've become desensitized to the violence in Torah, but I don't think that's it. I do know that lately in class whenever G-d delivers a violent blow to the Israelites--or their enemies--I've been thinking that cliché phrase "G-d works in mysterious ways," and then not feeling so troubled by what I've just read. And often in class I've had the urge to say, "We say we don't understand why G-d is doing this, but why do we have to understand G-d? Isn't it enough just to be close to G-d?"

But I've refrained from saying this out of fear of appearing flip or taking the easy way out of a discussion, especially since the entire point of Torah study is to try to understand Torah. But understanding Torah, I believe, is very different from understanding G-d. It's a tall order for me to understand G-d, but I can try to be close to G-d. In fact, one of the things that attracts me to Judaism so much is the tenet that G-d is not quantifiable, G-d

is not who we want G-d to be.

Often, I think, we try to understand G-d in order to be closer to G-d. This is especially true whenever something painful or tragic occurs in our lives. There have been many painful things in my life that I've had a very difficult time understanding, and often I turn to G-d with questions. Just last Friday, for example, I was walking my small dog, Harry, when a German Shepherd leaped out and attacked him and I had to kick the dog off him. Harry's okay now, but he does have some torn cartilage in his ear. That night, as I was carrying him home, I thought, "G-d, this dog has had such a hard life. Why are you letting this happen?"

I immediately realized this line of thinking was pointless, but still it came into my head. I didn't understand why this event had happened, but that night I did understand when Harry curled up next to me as he slept, his way of saying thank you and I love you. I did understand the importance and power of comforting and healing one of G-d's creatures. And two days later, when I went to collect payment from the German Shepherd's owner for my dog's vet bills, I fully expected to have a blow-out confrontation with the owner. Instead I found a kind, sorrowful woman who paid me more than twice the amount of the bill and told me the story of how she'd moved to Los Angeles from Siberia. I didn't understand why G-d would allow my dog to be hurt, but I did understand the woman's sorrow about what her dog had done, and I did make a connection with someone I may never have spoken to had this painful event not happened.

The past couple of years, I've also had to deal with my mother's failing health and the possibility of her death. I've had a difficult time understanding why she has been so ill, why G-d would let this happen. This past October, as I sat by my mother's side in the hospital, I didn't understand why she was saying the things she was saying, why she was telling me about the things in her house she wanted me to have, as if she were going to die very soon. But I did understand as she held my hand and told me she loved me. That's when I felt close to G-d. That's when I really felt I was in the presence of G-d.

My point here with these two examples is that so often, I think, we spend energy trying to understand G-d in order to be close to G-d. We want to endow G-d with human qualities, but in Torah when G-d acts in human ways--with jealousy or anger or violence--we have a hard time comprehending it. And when something bad occurs in our lives, it's natural for us to think, "G-d, why are you allowing this to happen?" I know I've done it. But in my own life, the times when I've felt the closest to G-d haven't been when I feel I understand G-d, but when I've made the effort to understand other people, to help others, to reach out to others. When we try to understand others--to forge connections--we really are in the presence of G-d.

Near the end of this week's Torah portion, there's a passage that to me is extremely resonant and meaningful. The Israelites, once again, speak out against G-d and Moses, complaining of their shortage of bread and water. According to this passage, the Israelites:

traveled from Mount Hor by way of the Red Sea to go around the land of Edom. And the people's soul was getting short on the way. And the people spoke out against G-d and against Moses: "Why did you bring us up from Egypt to die in the wilderness? Because

there's no bread, and there's no water, and our soul is disgusted with the cursed bread."

Not only are the people's souls short, but they're actually disgusted. Wow. Imagine what it would take for one's soul to be disgusted.

After reading this passage, I considered the antonyms of the words "short" and "disgusted," which would be "long" and perhaps "delighted." And I thought about what it might take for our souls to be lengthened, for our souls to be delighted. In this passage, the Israelites are pretty self-absorbed. There's no description of their comforting one another on their arduous journey; instead they speak out against G-d and Moses. No wonder they feel their souls are short, no wonder their souls are disgusted: They aren't listening to one another. Their souls feel short because the Israelites are being short-sighted. How quickly they forget the acts of kindness and self-sacrifice of those around them: Aaron standing between the living and the dead and halting G-d's plague, Moses pleading with G-d not to destroy the Israelites for their sins, Miriam leading them in song and dance at the edges of the Red Sea.

So perhaps in order for our souls to be lengthened, for our souls to grow and be delighted, we must remember to connect with one another, to try to understand one another, to comfort one another during events and crises that are difficult to understand. Maybe this is how we lengthen our souls. And if G-d works and speaks through the acts of kindness of ourselves and other people, which I like to believe, perhaps this is where G-d can best be known, where we can grow the closest to G-d...and, maybe, ultimately understand G-d.

Shabbat Shalom! Come to Torah study on Thursday nights!