

Shabbat Ekev

July 26, 2002

Rabbi Lisa Edwards
Beth Chayim Chadashim

One of Torah's most famous verses is in this week's Torah portion: one does not live by bread alone. Unfortunately, its fame comes mostly from New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew [4:4], where Jesus uses it. At least we know from that passage that Jesus, good Jewish boy that he was, knew his Torah, for he quotes the whole second half of the verse, saying, "it is written: 'one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.'"

"One does not live by bread alone." We usually take that line to mean that we need more in life than just having our physical needs met. But look at the verse in context. Even Jesus left off the beginning of the verse, which quotes Moses speaking to the Israelites at the end of the 40 years, saying: "God afflicted you and made you hungry, and had you eat manna--which neither you nor your parents had known--in order to make you know that one does not live by bread alone, but rather one lives by all that comes from the mouth of God." [Deut. 8:3] Anything, including manna, that unidentified substance (some biologists think it was the secretion of insects - yum!! Plaut, p.1387) can sustain us for as long as God wants it to.

But I like to turn that verse just a bit more: maybe "one lives by all that comes from the mouth of God" means simply that everything we live on comes from the mouth of God -- all of it, all of life. In Hebrew the word for manna is man, and it's most often called ha-man, the manna. That Hebrew looks and sounds a lot like the name Haman, that very bad man -- you know, the enemy of the Jews in the Book of Esther, the villain of the Purim story, the one we all boo and hiss on that rowdy holiday. In this verse, what happens if we picture Haman, the villain, along with manna, the heavenly food that sustained us in the wilderness? . . . God gave you Haman and manna, both, the most evil and the most wondrous, so that you would know that we do not live by simple, familiar bread alone, but we live by taking sustenance from everything that touches our lives -- the worst and the best of it.

Can we do it do you think? Can we turn all this uncertainty and fear around? make them into motivations for embracing life? especially in scary times, especially when uncertainty and fear seem to rule and send us cowering to a corner? Not easily, of course, but I have seen some of you choose the course that embraces life. Being struck low yourself, you've nonetheless turned to help others. Heartbroken by the threats to Israel, and Israel's responses, you're finding ways to be supportive. Frustrated by the absence of laws to protect our own rights, you work steadily to change those laws.

And others of you -- I've seen the way griefs and sorrows, sudden and unexpected losses,

have made you plunge headlong into taking risks -- risks on love or on jobs or on joining this community, studying Judaism, even checking out the possibilities of God in your life. Some time after our "bread alone" verse, comes another in which Moses says to the people, "And now, Israel, what does God ask of you? Only this: Revere (or fear or be in awe) God your God. [Deut. 10:12]

Says the Talmud (Berachot 33b), why does God ask only reverence of us? And it answers, "Because everything is in the hand of God except the reverence of God." Everything else already comes from God -- remember what follows "One does not live on bread alone"? "One lives by everything that comes from the mouth of God." Says the Talmud, everything it takes to live comes from the mouth of God except our attitude toward God, that, we must supply ourselves, and that alone is what God asks of us.

Some of you, I know, know already that one does not live by bread alone. If we can't embrace what befalls us - and certainly the Haman side of things is difficult to embrace - can we at least use it in some way, can we learn from it, can we let it help us or let it help us help others? I don't know the answer except in what I've seen some of you model - the ways in which even difficulties and sorrows leave you awestruck, and make you a better, stonger, more loving person. No easy challenge, to be sure, and it doesn't happen automatically. It seems to be a choice people make - to revere God, to be awestruck by all that is in God's world, to find in the bad at least some good whether or not you are a person who finds yourself acquainted with God.

After services tonight Jeremy and Jonathan Falk invite you to join them back here in the sanctuary (after we refresh ourselves with some manna out there), so that they can tell us about their recent trip to Israel for the World Congress of g/l/b/t Jews. Even in the worst of times - very bad times anyway -- they found much sweetness in their visit, much to admire, much that left them awestruck. [perhaps we should just say, very bad times (I learned from Shakespeare that "the worst is not so long as we can say, 'this is the worst.'" King Lear)]

Manna, some say, whatever its earthly source, was sweet and pleasant to the taste and touch. In Psalms it is called lechem hashamayim, heavenly bread. Some say even that it tasted different, but wonderful, to each person. Others say that it tasted good only to those who were willing to share it. Still others say it tasted wonderful to those who appreciated it, and bitter to those who doubted or complained.

In the hard times, in the scary times, may each of us find a way to turn the bitter into sweet.

Shabbat Shalom