

**Sermon Beha'alotekha**  
**By Rabbi Brad Bloom**  
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Most of us know what it is like to indulge a desire that we know we crave even if it isn't good for us in the long run. For some it is food. Others might say shopping. Sadly there are those who gamble or take illegal drug and narcotics. Watching Television or living through the Internet and computer games and the list goes on. Not being able to extract ourselves from such desires diminishes us in a physical sense as well as a spiritual or moral context.

This week's Torah portion, Bahalotek in the book of Numbers, we see the Israelites struggling with old habits or desires from servitude as they face the unknown of freedom. And they too are pulled to the old habits that served them well in the short run but had long term effects that weren't in their best interests. We find them embroiled with Moses regarding their hunger for normal food versus God's bestowing unlimited Manna upon them. This generation cannot seem to adjust to the idea that they were no longer dependent upon Pharaoh. They confront their yearnings and nostalgia for a life of being subject to their old habits, passions, and desires.

Is there a connection from the experience of our ancient forbearers to us? Putting personal indulgences aside, I see as the struggle we as a society have with our dependency, not so different from an insatiable addiction, we have to the oil. The question that arises out of the Torah portion is whether we can draw a comparison to what is happening in the Gulf of Mexico to the lessons that the Torah teaches us as a society about being so tied to an uncontrollable need that is never satisfied? I maintain that the answer is yes.

In the Torah portion the Israelites are about to head off towards the Promised Land. But the children of Israel are dealing with the realities of how to survive. They struggle between the lofty goals of fulfilling the Divine Promise and coping with the day to day challenges of freedom. They get upset quite often when they do not have their basic needs fulfilled as they once were by the kingdom of Pharaoh. So they grumble and kvetch

In chapter 11, they say, "Would that we were given meat to eat! We remember the fish, which we were to eat in Egypt for nothing!" Later on in the book of Numbers we will read more complaining about having too much quail or manna and then, at times, not enough water. This gets to be a problem for God and especially for Moses. Moses is about to throw in the towel because he just can't stand the incessant grumblings of his people. He says to God,

"Why have you dealt ill with your servant? Have I not found favor in your sight that you lay the burden of all this people upon me? I am not able to bear all this people myself alone, because it is too heavy for me. And if you deal thus with me, Kill me, I pray You, out of hand."

In chapter 11 Moses describes the problem. The people, among whom I am, are Six hundred thousand men on foot: and yet You have said: I will give them meat that they may eat a whole month! If flocks and herds be slain for them, will they suffice them? Or if all the fish of the sea be gathered together for them, Will they suffice them?"

In other words, Moses asks God, “What is the real long term solution because this is not working out right.”

Are we not asking the same questions about our energy needs today? Given what we are seeing in the Gulf Oil spill, are we not exposing once again the consequences and the risks of maintaining our way of life? Are we so different from our ancestors in that we are pulled between fulfilling our economic functions that lay so heavily on oil and our wisdom to know that we cannot continue with this kind of habit in the long run. Are the risks to our long-term survival just as serious by the process to mine the earth for oil regardless if there is a finite or infinite amount of this precious resource?

The rabbis sensed this lust for the finer foods that dwelt not only in the stomach of the generation of the exodus but also in their hearts and souls. With a little bit of rabbinical scripture exegesis In one verse, “And the people journeyed from Kirvot Ha-Ta’avah to Hazerot; and they dwelled in Hazerot. The translation of Kivrot ha-ta’avah means graves of lust. The rabbis offer two interpretations on the same verse. One is couldn’t the name of the place they left be called, instead, ‘graves of those who lusted?’” After all, what was buried there was those who had lusted incessantly for their kind of food and not the lust itself?

The second interpretation is, One can answer that the people who remained alive, who had seen the fate of those who lusted uncontrollably for food from the old country, were so moved that they lost all their lust. Thus, not only were those who had lusted buried there but lust itself. (Binah Le-itim)

Again the rabbis are trying to teach us that hidden in the Hebrew of the Torah verses is the clue to a deeper meaning. It is that our inability to control our lust for the material can hurt us in the long run. The consequences we see today in the Gulf of Mexico. How much air time on television will networks and cable news show regarding the scenes of the destruction of our wildlife? Will it finally prompt us to ponder the unknowable consequences of this largest of environmental disasters in our nation’s history? There will be graves on the shores and in the gulf that result from our need to mine the gulf for oil. Some of those are the humans who died on that oil rig. Others will be the birds, fish and sea animals that we already see covered with oil and still other life forms that sink to the bottom of the ocean floor that we will never see.

Similarly will our lust for those resources be buried along with them? Will it take this incident to serve as a final warning that we must break out of a similar kind of slave mentality that has blinded us about finding alternative resources that can meet our needs without strip mining the earth for oil? Are we really that much different in our lust for this substance, this economic narcotic, that we cannot live without and for whom many say we cannot in the long run live by while using it?

The stories of the Torah that focus on these grumblings of the Israelites for more food and resources are really about portraying their struggle between the dependency upon God for basic needs and the human need to create their own solutions for their survival. Which approach shall

prevail? In the Torah the generation of the Exodus never resolved that dilemma which was why their children's generation became the one who could move forward into the Promised Land.

My biggest concern is that we as a nation will only focus our attention to the technological question of 'What shall we learn from this debacle of biblical proportions?' Some will direct that question to refer to better mining techniques. Others will take a different perspective noting full well that there are moments when the very resources that we have come to depend upon can in unpredictable ways poison our way of life. The recent Gulf Oil spill proves that point.

We do not know for sure the short or long term consequences of the oil spill. In the Torah we see a series of advances and backslidings as the Israelites defined and refined their mission. The hardest part, the rabbis say, about leaving Egypt was stripping the feeling of dependency from Egypt and slavery as a state of mind out of them, that is, out of their hearts and souls. Is America's journey towards preserving the earth and the land of our country in particular as a Promised Land for our progeny so different than Israel's trek to the original Promised Land?

The prayerbook says, "My god, you have given me a pure soul. You created and formed it, breathed it into me." Similarly, are we not obligated to preserve the land and the seas so that it will remain pure for the next generation? When we view episodes like the oil spill, should we not reflect upon the divinely inspired role of human stewardship of the planet that we accepted upon ourselves long ago? Are we willing to profane that role for another pound of meat in the desert?