

Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah - B'ha-alotekha

I love illustrated allegories and parables. These are stories that teach wonderful lessons about life, through the most poignant of story lines. This mode of teaching dates back to antiquity. Aesop taught through allegory. We all know the story of the Tortoise and the Hare. Plato taught us of his cosmology (theory of the universe) through the parable of the cave. The Talmud teaches through storytelling, as well. We learn most easily when one presents a lesson in a way that we can follow. Stories and demonstrations always teach better than lectures. Some of these stories are just "in your face!"

One of my favorite parables most recently heard involves a meandering man who approaches a sage who inquired after what he was seeking. "I seek knowledge," the man said, as he continued to meander about casually. The sage took him to the river and just when they got chest deep, the sage plunged the seeker's head underwater. The Sage asked the student, "What have you come here for?" "The surprised reply came, "I have come to seek knowledge." The sage plunged the man's head under again. The result was the same. The third time, though, when the man's head came up he responded, "Give me air! Give me air!" The sage then said, "When you want knowledge as much as you want air, you shall have it." The sage addressed the integrity and intention of the young man. Knowledge is not something that you find, it is something that you grow and earn. Further, knowledge is not a casual journey, it is an intentional one. No, not every parable affirms all truths, for there is something of great value to be said about spending a little intentional meandering time, but this parable makes a point that we usually ignore. The journey for spiritual or intellectual growth is an intentional one. I guess, one could even say that where one meanders with intention, it is ... intentional. While there are epiphanic moments of revelation, by and large, most all spiritual growth happens because we pay more close attention to the world than we had been doing.

The notion that we have to pay attention is a timeless religious truth. This week, Torah provides us a wonderful metaphor making this point. The word *beha'alotcha* is understood to mean "kindle." In context, it means to raise the flame on the lights at the entrance to the altar area. There are lights all around the Tabernacle. There is fire burning 24 hours a day on the altar. These lights, though, are different. These lights illuminate the altar area. There is plenty of light by which the priest can see whether or not the animal or grains being offered on the altar are defective or not. There is plenty of light to know whether or not that knife is actually cutting through the animal and not the stone of the altar ... or the priest. These lights allow for "extra light" on the process. They help us see the stuff that happens around the altar. They help us with perspective as we get to see the priest's actions, the concentration exhibited on the priest's face, and the sweat of his/her brow. It is not just the cooking of an animal on an altar. It is the taking of life, it is the preparation of food. At the same time, the priest and any who are watching are forced, under the light, to wrestle with reconciling both of the above and so much more. Torah is teaching us that while performing the ritual correctly is important, perhaps enlightenment as to its value and its context is even more important. The lights have to face front. The lights have to illumine the setting.

In our real world lives, we go through the motions of doing a lot of what we do. We march to calendars that are over booked. We sit through meetings paying only partial attention to what is happening, while

playing games or sending messages on our phones. We study for tests more to pass the test than to gain the knowledge. In each case, we have conditioned ourselves to having only parts of experiences. We are more concerned with getting past experiences than having them. We need to take a step back and shed the extra light, look with a little more urgency and intention, and glean from each experience a much broader understanding of its value and context. We cannot build meaningful relationships by accident. We cannot mend broken hearts without real effort and focused compassion.

Two engineering firms were commissioned to bridge the harbor. They gathered the supplies and the laborers and set to work on opposite shores, committing to meet in the middle. Everything was going well and the two teams were making tremendous progress on their respective tasks, until they began running out of materials and prepared for the union of the two sides. The excitement began to build because that meant that they were near half way, and the two sides would meet soon. As they turned at what should have been the appropriate moment to meet and shake hands, they found themselves ten feet apart ... sideways. They each did the job they were assigned correctly. To a "t" everything was measured and secured. They finished their project, but they failed to build a bridge. Building a bridge between two shores will only serve to make matters of isolation (one from the other) worse, if we fail to be intentional about building a meaningfully constructed bridge. As we go about completing our lists of things to do, let's make sure that we gain value from each step taken and each task completed. It is the fullness of the soul that will change the world, not the completion of the checklist. Shabbat Shalom.