



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Behaalotecha

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June 6, 2015
Behaalotecha

A Lesson in Addiction



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Do you bury your cravings or do your cravings bury you?

Cravings (or addictions) are so dangerous because we think we can stop anytime we want. We say, “Nah, don’t worry, stop pestering me, I can stop doing it anytime I want.”

A fascinating Torah narrative – about falling quail and a geographical location known as “the Graves of Craving” – teaches us a timeless lesson about our lives today, and how to overcome any addiction that may imprison us.

Moreover, a teaching of the Baal Shem Tov, based on the 14th century Kabbalistic text, Brit Menucha, redefines everything we have ever known about addiction, craving, and lets us know that, sometimes, getting lust is required before you get found.

A LESSON IN ADDICTION FROM THE “GRAVES OF CRAVING”

1. Give Me a Break (Joke)

A mechanic noticed his co-worker drinking brake fluid at lunch.

“What are you doing, man? You can’t drink that stuff!”

“Relax,” replied his co-worker. “This stuff tastes pretty good, and I don’t drink it all the time.”

“Seriously,” the mechanic exclaimed, “that brake fluid is poison!”

“Hey, man,” yelled the co-worker. “Back off. I can stop any time I want!”

2. The Danger of Addictions

Addictions are so dangerous because we think we can stop anytime we want. We say, “Nah, don’t worry, stop pestering me, I can stop doing it anytime I want.”

Except perhaps for drinking brake fluid, it is not at all easy to stop doing a habit that has become ingrained into our fabric, especially if that something feeds a certain strong desire and brings a significant amount of excitement or calm (whichever one craves for), no matter how fleeting it may be.

In addition to all of the physiological factors that influence certain addictions, there are also very powerful psychological/emotional factors that make it unbearably difficult for us to break a bad habit. And thinking or believing that we can stop at any time makes it that much worse.

Addictions come in infinite forms and are dressed in countless guises – a person may be addicted to physical things, emotional things, intellectual things, or spiritual things.

On the unhealthy side of things, a person may be addicted to drugs, money, power, sex, food, drink, smoking, or gambling.

In the realm of holiness, the idea of addiction may mean doing something habitually, by rote – such as mechanically putting on tefillin in the morning without intention and vitality, or lighting Shabbat candles without intention. B'chol yom yihiyeh b'aynecho k'chadoshim, or chadoshim¹. Mitzvot need to be performed as if they were given today anew. They should not be done by rote, any more than saying, "I love you," should be done by rote. Love is an honor and a privilege. It should be a conscientious experience every single time.

3. Torah & Addiction

The Torah, as we all well know and appreciate, is a document of eternal and timeless truth. Within its hallowed pages lies the divine matrix of the universe and within its sacred words pulses the Godly guidance for all of life's challenges.

What does the Torah, a book of practical instruction, say about addiction? How does the Torah, the cosmic blueprint, guide us to break free of addiction's asphyxiating tentacles?

The answer is contained within the dripping fats of the plumed quail described in this week's Torah reading.

4. Parshat Behaalotcha

Our Torah portion, as all Torah portions, is a fascinating one. Entitled Parshat Behaalotcha, it opens with the description of Aaron kindling the menorah, and ends with a poultry (but in no way paltry) story of profound consequence.

The people were looking to complain, and it was evil in the ears of the Lord. The Lord heard and His anger flared, and a fire from the

¹ Rashi Yitro 19:1. Eikev 11:13. Tovo 26:16. See Shulchan Aruch Admur Hazakon Orach Chaim 61:2.

Lord burned among them, consuming the extremes of the camp. The people cried out to Moses, and Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down. He named that place Tab'erah, for the fire of the Lord had burned among them there. But the mixed multitude among them began to have strong cravings. Then even the Children of Israel once again began to cry, and they said, "Who will feed us meat?"²

And Moses too begged of God:

"Where can I get meat to give all these people? For they are crying to me, saying, 'Give us meat to eat.'"³

The Jewish people were being provided with manna from heaven. But the manna wasn't enough for them – where was the BRISKET? Where was the CAKE? – And they began to complain, begging, beseeching for a more varied menu.

And Moses, as the representative and advocate of the Jewish people, implored the Creator to please supply meat and fulfill the peoples' craving.

So what happened?

A wind went forth from the Lord and swept quails from the sea and spread them over the camp about one day's journey this way and one day's journey that way, around the camp, about two cubits above the ground. The people rose up all that day and all night and the next day and gathered the quails. The one who gathered the least collected ten heaps. They spread them around the camp in piles.

You want meat? Here's meat!

Quail came from everywhere; there was so much meat that even the lazy⁴ people, who gathered the least amount of quail collected ten heaps of the stuff. That's how much quail there was. Indeed, the Torah tells us that:

²Numbers 11:1-4.

³Ibid 13.

⁴Rashi ad loc.

You shall eat it not one day, not two days, not five days, not ten days, and not twenty days. But even for a full month until it comes out your nose and nauseates you.⁵

(From a nutritional standpoint it does not sound as if this story will end well.)

After answering their desire for meat, as the people were still devouring the fatty proteins, the Torah tells us how this story ends:

The meat was still between their teeth; it was not yet finished, and the anger of the Lord flared against the people, and the Lord struck the people with a very mighty blow. He named that place Graves of Craving [Kivrot Hataavah] for there they buried the people who craved.⁶

5. Curiosities

This entire episode, taken at face value, is flush with curiosities:

- How could one not be satisfied when feasting on manna, a heavenly sustenance that landed at on your doorstep and tasted, literally, divine? Why beg for mere meat?
- Why did Moses beseech God for meat?
- Why did God supply such copious amounts of meat, to the extent that it comes out your nose and nauseates you? Could not a fine steak have sufficed, or even just a burger or a hotdog?
- Finally, if God did answer their prayers for meat, providing an endless supply of poultry, why did the anger of God flare against the people, to the extent that the place was named, Kivrot Hataavah, Graves of Craving?

Quails, graves and cravings – what, pray tell my fellow Jews, is going on here?

⁵ Ibid 19-20.

⁶ Ibid 31-34.

6. Three Places

Moses repeats much of the Torah in the final book, Deuteronomy, the “book of repetition.” There, Moses documents the Jewish people’s travels in the wilderness, where they encamped and alighted, and what happened at each of those places.

In particular, Moses names three places and reminds Israel of them:

And at Tab’erah,⁷ and at Massah,⁸ and at Kivrot Hataavah, you provoked the Lord to anger.⁹

What are these three places, Tab’erah, Massah, and Kivrot Hataavah?

- 1) Tab’erah means “burning,” the name coming from the fire of the Lord that burned among them, as we read in this week’s portion.
- 2) Massah means “testing,” a place where the Israelites tested God.
- 3) And Kivrot Hataavah, meaning the “Graves of Craving,” received its name from the episode just quoted.

7. Kabbalistic Explanation

The Brit Menucha,¹⁰ a 14th century Kabbalistic work by Rabbi Avraham ben Yitzchak of Grenada, explains these three levels in a most soulful way.

The three places – that of burning fire, (Tab’erah) testing (Massah), and graves of craving (Kivrot Hataavah) – resemble three essential places we must reach to traverse through the wilderness in order to reach the Promised Land.

- 1) Tab’erah: The Divine light of truth can be like a raging fire. If you don’t stand in awe of it, it can consume you, but if you respect it and acknowledge its power you will be protected from its burn. So lesson

⁷ See Numbers 11:3: He named that place Tab’erah (burning), for the fire of the Lord had burned among them there.

⁸ See Exodus 17:7: He named the place Massah [testing] and Meribah [quarreling] because of the quarrel of the children of Israel and because of their testing the Lord, saying, Is the Lord in our midst or not?

⁹ Deuteronomy 9:22.

¹⁰ Brit Menucha, Haderech Harishonah.

number one from Tab'erah: God's power is a bonfire. Stand in awe of it and revere it.

2) Massah: Massah is spelled mem, samach, hei. Anav, the Hebrew word meaning "humility," is spelled ayin, nun, vov. Ayin is the letter that follows samach in the Hebrew alphabet, nun follows mem, and vov follows hei. By way of mystical alphabetical interchange, massah is related to anav, a person of humility. In this place of humility, all know what is what and who is who. So lesson number two from Massah: humility.

3) Kivrot Hataavah: There are two ways to understand this place – these Graves of Craving – as a place that buried the people that craved, or as a place where the people buried their cravings. True joy, true restfulness and satisfaction, is when you reach such a lofty state, where you sublimate and bury your cravings in face of your awareness of the Divine presence that permeates all of existence. Your cravings cease to have any power when you recognize that the only true reality is God.

8. The Baal Shem Tov's Lesson

The Baal Shem Tov references the Brit Menucha to teach a lesson in serving our Creator.¹¹

We are born into this world for a reason: to transform this barren wilderness into a flourishing orchard of a Promised Land.

This endeavor takes balance, what's called rotzoi and shuv – tension and resolution, attraction and contraction. Your soul only desires to cleave to its source, the Creator above, but if it gets its desire, its rotzoi, then your body will expire and revert to a state similar to before you were born. This is called Kivrot Hataavah, the Graves/Burial of the Cravings: Spiritual transcendence overwhelms and "buries" material cravings.

But annihilating our material existence is not the purpose of our lives. The purpose is to sublimate, not destroy, our cravings. To harness and

¹¹ Keter Shem Tov Hashalem #178 (Kehot 2004, p. 98).

direct them toward spiritual goals. We are born to change this world down below not to escape from it. Thus, God programmed us with the need and desire to eat and drink, our *shuv*, so as to ground our lives and retain and maintain our material hold here, in this physical earth, but one that is informed and guided by the soul's light.

Life then is striking the right balance between our soul's transcendent desire to reach beyond and our body's need to keep us grounded. A fusion of body and soul, in which our material lives are a means to – and permeated with – spiritual ends.

9. The Explanation

Perhaps, with everything we learned, we can explain the story of our portion as follows:

The generation of Israelites that traveled through the wilderness – leaving the slavery of Egypt, heading towards redemption in the Promised Land – was no ordinary generation: they lived miracles more than they experienced nature, and so they wanted to touch God, they wanted to ascend from this physical plane.

The desert generation ate manna, walked through the split sea, received the Torah, was enveloped in Clouds of Glory, and did not have to work to earn a living; everything was provided for them. It is for this reason, in fact, that they were weary of entering the Holy Land, a land that required effort and work, which meant handling matter, contending with the challenges of materialism.

But the purpose of existence is to enter the land, eat the food of the earth (not the heavenly manna) and battle with material cravings and sublimate them. However, to achieve this integration requires a careful balance between matter and spirit.

So here is what happened: Despite the fact that the Jews in the wilderness were sustained by spiritual food, they still had bodies and they still need to fulfill the purpose of entering the Promised Land and transform-

ing the material world into a Divine home. So how does a spiritual person deal with a material challenge?

Ostensibly, in one of two ways:

Either you escape into the spiritual and try to avoid the material, which is not fulfilling the divine purpose of creation, or you engage the material with the risk of getting so immersed and indulging yourself that you then cannot escape the clutches of the materialism's seduction.

The Torah, however, teaches us a third way: When you enter into the fray with humility – not to indulge in your spiritual desires, and not to indulge in your material ones – then God blesses you with the ability and power to fuse the two together: Engage with the material and subliminate and direct its cravings toward a divine end.

And the episode with the quail in our Torah portion tells us this entire story – both about the problems with of the first two approaches, and the third solution.

10. Matter and Spirit

The mixed multitude (the *erev rav*) began to have strong cravings. They were physical people, souls within bodies, living in a material world. So despite the fact that they were being sustained by the spiritual manna and in general were saturated with divine blessings and protection in the wilderness, yet being *erev rav*, a mixed and confused multitude, their bodies craved for material sustenance.

And they influenced the Children of Israel in turn to once again began to cry, and they said, “Who will feed us meat?”

So God sent them an abundance of quail, which the people gathered in abundance as well in heaps and piles (the people rose up all that day and all night and the next day and gathered the quails. The one who gathered the least collected ten heaps. They spread them around the camp in piles).

Since they were ill-prepared for such material abundance, especially considering their being “spoiled” by their spiritual gifts and sustenance,

they simply were unable to contain themselves and indulged and indulged to the point of becoming totally overwhelmed:

You shall eat it not one day, not two days, not five days, not ten days, and not twenty days. But even for a full month until it comes out your nose and nauseates you.

Until they perished with the meat still between their teeth. And thus the place was named Graves of Craving [Kivrot Hataavah] for there they buried the people who craved.

As the saying goes, “Be careful what you wish for – because you might just get it.” Well the Israelites did.

You see, when you indulge in your own desires – whether they are spiritual or material – you are bound to be consumed and buried by your own very cravings.

But then we learn from this story the positive, third approach – as illuminated by the Brit Menucha and the Baal Shem Tov: Instead of being buried by your cravings and desires, bury them in the light of the divine. When a person dedicates their lives to serving their Higher Calling, to realizing their Divine mission to refine and transform their corner of the physical and material world, then they have the power to bury and sublimate their cravings.

We thus have before us two ways to deal with cravings, desires and addictions:

- 1) The nature of craving and desire is such that left untamed turns into a fire that holds you hostage in its tentacles. This is the power of every addiction, in which your obsessions tragically dig your own grave.
- 2) But on a positive note, the “Graves of Craving” as a state of utter self-nullification through cleaving to G-d when one experiences the “death” of cravings, they become buried with no potential of reviving inappropriate desires. Perhaps this state can be accessed by people in recovery, who after hitting rock-bottom and losing control over their own lives to addiction, rehabilitate themselves by surrendering to a Higher Power which enables them to “kill” their desires.

11. Cravings and Addictions

Cravings/addictions are devastating. But we can learn from them.

Their sheer power mean that they are filled with energy. And like all energy and power, like fire, two things can happen: the can burn you, the energy can consume you. Or you can harness the fire and consume it, by directing it toward constructive ends.

And that is our life challenge.

We are here into this world for one and only reason: to fulfill the Divine Will, the mission for which ate souls were sent to this earth. Feeding ourselves, whether it is with spirituality or with food or with artificial substances is not the goal, but only a means to the goal. Sure, feasting on holiness helps us achieve the goal but it isn't the goal – for that end we could have remained on high, sparing ourselves the pains of child-birth and the tribulations of life on earth.

Additionally, feeding ourselves food or any other healthy material substance could be both a means to help us live and elevate ourselves, but it is could also be an end in itself.

The Baal Shem Tov teaches that the key to everything is the delicate balance between rotzoi and shuv, between wanting to have a heavenly time (rotzoi) while simultaneously realizing and acknowledging that, without our work, without our shuv, there is no way to receive the light without being blinded.

Addiction is having one extreme or the other – it means wanting only to have the rotzoi, the light without the work, the meat without working for it. This will surely lead to lust, craving and gluttony. But only having the shuv, the boring predictably without the desire for the beyond, will also surely lead to quiet desperation and inevitable addiction.

Only the dance of attuning ourselves to the beyond while staying in tune with the here-and-now will assure victory over any and all addictions.

12. Three Beers (Joke)

A man walks into a Manhattan bar and orders three beers.

The bartender brings him the three beers, and the man proceeds to alternately sip one, then the other, then the third, until they're gone.

He then orders three more and the bartender says, "Sir, I know you like them cold, so you can start with one, and I'll bring you a fresh one as soon as you're low."

The man says, "You don't understand. I have two brothers, one in Jerusalem and one in the Boro Park. We made a vow to each other that every Saturday night, we'd still drink together. So right now, my brothers are drinking too, and we're drinking together."

The bartender thinks it's a wonderful tradition, and every week he sets up the guy's three beers. Then one week, the man comes in and orders only two. He drinks them and then orders two more. The bartender says sadly, "Knowing your tradition, I'd just like to just say that I'm sorry you've lost a brother."

The man replies, "Oh, my brothers are fine - I quit drinking."

13. Lust & Found (Conclusion)

The answer to all of your unhealthy desires, lusts, and addictions is pretty simple:

Connect with something beyond them and realize you are here to serve. And then channeling the energy of your craving toward a higher end.

Either you dig graves for your cravings and addictions, or your cravings and addictions will dig graves for you.

Never be predicable - but dance between rotzoi and shuv, the heavenly and the earthly - and you will surely transcend every bond that holds you prisoner.

May it be so on a cosmic scale, and may we all see it with our own eyes, speedily in our days. Amen!

Shabbat Shalom!

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