

A Farewell Drashah:
Appetizing, Nourishing and Uplifting Words of Torah
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Parashat Emor
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Shabbat shalom. This morning we read from the Torah portion called Emor.

Emor is a rich Torah portion, presenting many different topics worth exploring, such as **Shabbat observance**; the **Jewish holiday calendar**; the injunction to **sanctify and not to desecrate God's name**; and the **obligation to be considerate of the needs of the poor**.

I've spoken about each of those topics over the years. They're interesting; they're important; they're definitely worth speaking about.

But as I was reviewing the portion, I realized that there is a paragraph -- a paragraph that we read this morning -- that I hadn't previously spoken about.

That, in and of itself, is interesting. After all, we read from today's portion not only once a year, at this time of year, but parts of it are also read on the first two days of the holiday of Sukkot and on the second day of Passover. I've been here for over 30 years, so I think it's fair to say that I've encountered at least parts of this week's portion **at least 120 times**.

You'd think that, given that number of times, I might already have said everything I might want to say about this parashah. But no. I've never before focussed on *this one specific paragraph*.

The paragraph describes an obscure ritual that we don't observe anymore.



The text tells us that in the days when the Children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness, it was the practice each and every Shabbat to bring **12 loaves of bread to the mishkan, the portable sanctuary**, and lay them down on the table in front of the Holy of Holies, in two parallel rows. There they would sit for a week. Then, on the next Shabbat, new loaves would be brought, and the loaves that had been sitting there all week would be eaten by the priests.

The text emphasizes that this is a ritual that has to be performed each and every week. **“B’yom ha-shabbat, b’yom ha-shabbat”** -- “Every Shabbat, every Shabbat” the bread has to be brought. It is a *brit olam*, an eternal covenant, that must be performed **“tamid”** -- meaning, *regularly*, week in and week out.

This practice apparently continued for hundreds of years, both in the *mishkan*, the sanctuary in the wilderness, and in the Temple in Jerusalem.

Now, you might be wondering: Wouldn't the bread get stale after a whole week sitting on that table?

Well, the rabbis in the Talmud address that question. No, the Talmud says. It was a miracle:

Those sacred loaves of bread, we are told, **never grew stale**. They were just as warm and flavorful on the seventh day as they were when they were first put out there.¹ (Menachot 29a)

That's a lovely image to contemplate: loaves of bread that remained appetizing and fresh for a full week.

But, we might ask ourselves, how likely is that, *really*? How reasonable is it to believe that those loaves of bread remained appetizing as much as a full week later?

¹ דא"ר יהושע בן לוי נס גדול נעשה בלחם הפנים סילוקו כסידורו שנאמר (שמואל א כא, ז) לשום לחם חם ביום הלקחו

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) was a prominent 19th century German neo-Orthodox thinker. He wrote a commentary on the Torah, and he has a creative way of understanding this. According to Rabbi Harold Kushner, Rabbi Hirsch says that we shouldn't take those words in the Talmud about those loaves *literally*. It wasn't a miracle, but a metaphor. Those twelve loaves of bread weren't as fresh as they had been when they were put out. Instead, he is telling us, the Talmud was saying something about **the experience of being in the sanctuary.**

That's what was fresh each and every Shabbat.

The mishkan, the sanctuary in the wilderness, he wrote, was **"immune to the process of boredom and habit that afflict many religious institutions. Rituals performed there did not grow stale or obsolete there."** (Quoted by Harold Kushner in the *Etz Hayyim Humash* commentary, p. 731.)

Wow. What an image to contemplate! What a goal to aspire to!

I'd like to think that each and every time we have studied Parashat Emor in this room, it has been as stimulating and as interesting as it was the previous time. I'd like to think that each and every time we as a community have studied *any* portion from the Torah together, it's been stimulating and interesting. That, at least, has been my goal.

Speaking personally, my experience is that every time I look at a Torah portion -- even one I've looked at 120 times previously -- I can always discover something fresh, something inspiring that can speak to me in the present. It's never stale. That's what Hirsch was driving at.

That's fortunate, because to me, when we study Torah in synagogue, we are not relating to it as an antiquarian document. We're relating to it as a source of wisdom, insight, and inspiration; as a text that has something to say to us **today**.

If it doesn't have something to teach us *today*, that just means that we haven't been looking hard enough.

This reminds me: a few months ago, as the conclusion of my tenure here at Temple Aliyah was getting closer and closer, someone said to me, half in jest: **“Finally, you don’t have to do any more sermon writing: all you have to do is to find one of your old ones and deliver it all over again.”**

Actually, as this Shabbat has approached, a number of people have said this to me.

But, ... this Shabbat is not any old Shabbat.

I get what those people were hinting at. I like some of my old sermons. I certainly put a lot of time and thought into them. If I spoke about something a few years ago, and it was worth hearing once, perhaps it is worth hearing twice!

But -- to me, at least -- I have always felt that I need to find **something that is fresh**; something that can speak to us about the situation that our community or our society is in *now* -- not the situation we might have been in several years ago. To teach something stale -- *to grow stale* -- is not very appealing.

Thinking about words of Torah the way we think about fresh bread is such an appetizing image, isn’t it? What better aroma to have in a house than the smell of freshly baked bread?

By the way, I’m sure I’m not the only one who’s smelled fresh bread in the house much more often during the past two years than ever before. In our household, we’ve gotten into the practice of baking *hallah* every week. I highly recommend it!

And sharing that hallah, breaking bread together on Shabbat -- it is a wonderful experience to have with others.

That’s why kiddush is an intrinsic part of our Shabbat experience.

But, thanks to Samson Raphael Hirsch, we’re not just talking about bread.

Divrei Torah -- reflections on the Torah -- like good bread, should always be **appetizing**. They should always be **delicious**. They should always be **nourishing**. They should always be **uplifting**, and give us that *feeling* we get when we smell a fresh loaf of bread, when we take that first bite into the *hallah* on Shabbat.

The Talmud sees a relationship between eating real bread and learning Torah.

In the Talmud we're taught that "eating bread in the morning [it's called, "*pat shacharit*"] helps one to study Torah, to retain the Torah one has learned, and to teach Torah." "And there are those who say that it **even dispels jealousy and induces love.**" I don't know if eating bread accomplishes all that, but the kind of Torah study that has always attracted me, *the kind of Torah study I've tried to share for thirty years*, surely "dispels jealousy and induces love." (See BM 107b; Sefer HaAggadah, 596: 229.)²

That love has long inhabited this place. I recognized from the start when I came to Temple Aliyah that this was a community in which people cared about one another. I've felt that love myself, from so many of you, when, for example, our family has experienced a loss or celebrated a simcha.

And I have felt it as we have done so many other things together during the many years that my family and I have lived here.

As I mentioned earlier, this week's parashah includes a review of the holiday cycle, starting with Passover and Shavuot, and going all the way through to Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur and Sukkot. **Think of the many holidays we've celebrated together.**

One of my sweetest holiday memories is praying outside, in the sukkah, during the holiday of Sukkot. You know, if it rains, you're not supposed to stay in the sukkah, so certainly over the years one would have expected, surely, that on at least one occasion or another, we wouldn't be able to hold services in the sukkah on the first days of Sukkot. But I believe that for over twenty years in a row, we

² ת"ר י"ג דברים נאמרו בפת שחרית מצלת מן החמה ומן הצנה ומן הזיקין ומן המזיקין ומחכימת פתי וזוכה בדין ללמוד תורה וללמד ודבריו נשמעין ותלמודו מתקיים בידו ... וי"א אף מוציא את הקנאה ומכניס את האהבה.

have managed to do just that. Of course, I'm not saying that the sukkah *held up* every year: there certainly have been years when the sukkah collapsed within days of the beginning of the holiday, but still, each and every year we were able to enjoy being together, praying together, and breaking bread together in the sukkah for at least the initial days of the holiday.

For many years, it has been the Needham Clergy Association's tradition to gather and to break bread together in the Temple Aliyah sukkah on Sukkot. Year after year, it's been a source of true joy to do that -- symbolizing how much we have in common, how committed we are to one another, and to our community, notwithstanding our doctrinal differences. I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge the fellowship and love that I've felt, and the joy that I've shared with the other members of the Needham Clergy Association, some of whom are here with us today. (Many thanks to **Ramin Abrishamian** and to **Rabbi Perlman** for their very kind remarks, to **Cynthia Ganung** for participating this morning.)

I'm looking toward retirement right now. There's a lovely image about getting older that appears in Psalm 92: "*Od yenuvun b'seivah, dsheinim v'raananim yihyu.*" "*They shall bear fruit even in old age; they shall be ever fresh and fragrant.*" At this stage of my life, **I like thinking about being fresh and fragrant; I like thinking about those appetizing and fresh loaves of bread.**

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Fortunately, this is not the last time that this week's *parashah* will be examined in this congregation.

Next year, God willing, there will be four more opportunities to hear this *parashah* read out loud here in shul and to hear it explicated. The congregation will have the opportunity to learn from the shul's incoming interim rabbi, what he has to say. And in the following year, there will be another four opportunities to learn about this *parashah* from and with yet another rabbi, a permanent successor, who will also certainly teach insights from the Torah. Perhaps these will be familiar insights; perhaps they will be insights that had not previously occurred to any of us.

I may be leaving this bima, but the opportunity for everyone in the congregation to continue to learn and thereby to grow -- will continue to remain here.

And not only that, but this will hopefully continue to be a place where people can literally **break bread together, talk with one another, listen to one another, inquire about one another's welfare, and care for one another.**

And it will also hopefully continue to be a place where the congregation can be inspired by the words and the values of our tradition **to reach beyond the walls of this sanctuary** to the outside world as well.

It has been so gratifying to me to have played a role in bringing **appetizing morsels of Torah** to our community on Shabbat mornings, to celebrate Shabbat and the holidays together, and to share with this congregation in so many other ways. -- I can't imagine a greater blessing than that.

May our bread never grow stale. May all of us who are here -- whether in person or through the miracles of technology -- **continue to hunger for Torah, continue to be nourished by Torah, and continue to grow in the wisdom of Torah.**

Shabbat shalom.