

The Turning Point
Parashah B'haalotcha
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After resisting for—oh, say, forty years or so—I finally broke down and saw a movie that I'd decided many years ago that I just didn't want to see. I went out and got the video of that classic film by Alfred Hitchcock, *The Birds*.

I don't intend to spoil it for anyone here who hasn't seen the film, don't worry. (In any event, I don't know if anything I say could compare with the visual impact of the film.) The first half of that film is very slow—intentionally so. Hitchcock depicts an ordinary seaside town in California, filled with ordinary people with ordinary concerns. But then, there's a turning point. There's a moment when “things change.” When the characters and you, the viewer, look at reality differently. And after that moment, everything is different.

I am not a film critic, but my understanding is that this is a classic element in cinema—as, of course, it is in literature: the “turning point.”

I thought about that as I reviewed this week's *parashah* earlier this week because we have such a turning point in our *parashah* and it's a turning point in which birds are quite prominent. It is, in fact, not only the turning point of the *parashah*, but the turning point of the entire book of Numbers. Indeed, you could argue that it's the turning point of the entire Exodus narrative.

During the first part of today's *parashah*, all is well. The Israelites are given final instructions in preparation for setting out on their journey out of the wilderness. The key thing they are told is to focus on that cloud in the middle of the camp, the cloud that covers the Tabernacle. If that cloud were to lift, it would be time to pull up stakes and head out. If the cloud rests, they are to set up camp. Very simple. At night, since you can't see a cloud too clearly at night, they would see a pillar of fire which would similarly be for them a symbol of God's presence. With this kind of protection, what is there to worry about? What more could they possibly desire?

They are also given very careful instructions about the bugle calls. When one is blown, the chieftains are to assemble; when two are blown, the entire community is



to gather. Short blasts (the sound of the “*truah*” on a shofar) mean that they should move forward. All very simple.

And then we’re told that they set forth on their journey, in the proper order, with the Tabernacle leading the way, seeking the next place to camp, and then we’re even told what Moses would say when the Ark was ready to move, and when it was ready to stop, words that should be familiar to us: “*Kumah Adonai, v’yafutzu oyvecha, v’yanusu misan’echa mipanecha!*”, or “*Shuva Adonai riv’vot alfei yisrael!*”

But then, when all looks well, when they’re on their way out of the wilderness; then comes the turning point.

“*Vayehi ha-am k’mi’ot on’anim.*”—“the people acted as if they had suffered a great loss.” (in Everett Fox’s translation, “Now the people were like those-who-grieve [over] ill-fortune.”) That’s the literal translation of the phrase usually translated, “The people took to complaining bitterly.” To be an “*onen*,” to be in the state of “*aninut*,” is to grieve. These people were acting as if they were grieving, even though they really weren’t. And they complained within earshot of God, for that was their intent: that God should hear them.

They had God’s protection: what more could they need? What more could they want? And yet, for some reason, it wasn’t enough.

“If only we had meat to eat?!” “Nothing to eat but this manna!” Things only get worse and worse.

Complaining has a malignant effect in a group. The anger, the disappointment, spreads from the people to God, to Moses. Soon, everybody is angry.

Finally, God brings the people what they want. In a scene that Hitchcock could have directed, quail start arriving: hundreds and hundreds and thousands of quail. So many that they cover the ground, several days journey wide, and one yard deep. It’s gruesome and repulsive.

From this point on, the previous tone of the story is never recovered. Aaron and Miriam soon begin gossiping about Moses, and in next week’s *parashah*, because the people are so picky, because the people are so demanding, they are condemned not to enter the land, but to wander for forty years. What an extraordinary, and from their standpoint, tragic conclusion to their liberation struggle. Think where they *could* have ended up, and think where they did.

Why did things turn out this way? Why this turning point? Could it have been prevented? *Is dissatisfaction inevitable in the human spirit?* Whether it is or not, our society does not permit us to test out the hypothesis.

In our society, we are encouraged not to be satisfied; instead, we are encouraged to buy and buy and buy. Where would our economy be if we were, all of us, contented with our lot? We're encouraged, with stronger marketing efforts than are employed anywhere else in our economy, to go into debt. And indeed, we've become a debtor nation on an alarming scale. Individuals borrow much, much more in our society than we ever used to, and our country as a whole is up to its ears in debt to a variety of countries, chief among them China. Whatever happened to Benjamin Franklin's advice in *Poor Richard's Almanac*, "A penny saved is a penny earned"?

Why is this happening? Ultimately, because we want more than we have. And our attitude has become, if we don't have the money for what we want, we can simply borrow it. (If we're the U. S. Government, we can do the same, but we also have an added remedy: we can just print money, print more IOU's, and leave it to our children to worry about paying it all back.)

Perhaps this is inevitable. As Ivan Illich once wrote, "In a consumer society there are inevitably two kinds of slaves: the prisoners of addiction and the prisoners of envy." Or, as John Kenneth Galbraith put it, "In the affluent society, no useful distinction can be made between luxuries and necessities."

This is a worrisome situation, which can spiral out of control.

Dissatisfaction with one's material possessions creates an unhappiness that can never be assuaged. No matter how much one acquires, there's always the person next door who has more. "Wanting more" creates a permanent state of demoralization.

In today's story, the people who want meat are told that they will get so much that, in the words of the text, "it will come out of your nostrils and become loathsome," (paraphrasing 11:20). The point is obvious: to be modest in our desires, and to appreciate what we have.

That all sounds very simple and very correct.

I am left, though, with the question I asked earlier: Is dissatisfaction inevitable? Or can human beings reach a state of satisfaction, even with what little they have?

The most religious song we sing at the Pesach seder is a song that we probably don't mean literally. The song is *Dayeinu*: "It's enough for us!"

One of the verses is, "If God had satisfied our needs during our forty years in the wilderness, but had not given us manna—*Dayeinu*." "It would have been enough for us!" Clearly, the Israelites in our *parashah* didn't believe that. They weren't able to sing that song. Are we being honest when we sing it?

Can we ever say, "It is enough!" I hope so. For if there's one message that this *parashah* is, I think, attempting to teach, it is that unless and until we can say that, true happiness will elude us.

As I said earlier, I'm no film critic. But several reviews of *The Birds* that I read on the Internet seem to agree that that is the point of that film as well. If and when we can say, as we do at the Pesach seder, "Even if I don't have a house as big as the Jones'—*Dayeinu*!"—if and when we can say that, and really mean it, we will have achieved a state of religious maturity that can lead, hopefully, to a state of bliss.

The Latin poet Horace (65-8 BCE) once wrote,

"Not the owner of many possessions will you be right to call happy:
He more rightly deserves the name of happy who knows how to
use the gods' gifts wisely . . ."

Transposing that into a monotheistic idiom, let me quote the words of Ben Zoma in *Pirkei Avot*:

Eizehu ashir? Who is wealthy?

Ha-sameach b'helko. The one who is content with his portion.

The People of Israel reached that tragic turning point in our *parashah* because, even though they had been freed from slavery, even though they were being sheltered in the wilderness, even though they were well on their way to the Promised Land, all that was not enough for them.

Let's not make the same mistake. Let's appreciate the blessings of life, of nature, of companionship. Let's not destroy ourselves with envy, and let's use the gifts with which God has blessed us with modesty and with wisdom.

Amen.