

“How Much is Enough?”
(Exodus 16:2-4; 9-15; 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13)

In his book, Who Needs God?, Rabbi Harold Kushner tells the story of a Stanford Sophomore, a pre-med student, whose parents gave him a summer trip to the Far East as a reward for doing so well in school. While there, he met a guru and after explaining his life at Stanford, the guru shook his head sadly and told him, “You are poisoning your soul with this success oriented way of life. Give it up; come join us in an atmosphere where we all share and love each other.” The student accepted his offer. He wrote to his parents explaining that he was dropping out of school to live in an ashram. Six months later, his parents received the following letter.

“Dear Mom and Dad,

I know you weren't happy with the decision I made last summer, but for the first time in my life, I am at peace. Here there is no competing, no hustling, no trying to get ahead of anyone else. In fact, this way of life is so much in harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only six months I've become the number two disciple, and I think I can be number one by June!”

I was sitting with three grieving friends of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff. Each was creative, well known and accomplished in their respective fields of writing, filmmaking and theatre. Each cherished her friendship with Barbara and felt devastated at her untimely death from lung cancer. They were recounting some of their memories--how intense, how powerful were their conversations, how exciting were their adventures, how much their friendship pushed them to create. As they were speaking out of the depths of their grief, a realization emerged from one of her friends. “Barbara lived so deeply, so fully, so richly that it was as if her 49 years had been a long life.” And then she added the word from the Passover Seder that is used in acknowledging all of the gifts God gave to Israel during the Exodus, “Dayenu.” It was enough. Enough love, enough discovery, enough intimacy, enough wisdom. “Dayenu.” Immediately, one of the other friends shot back, “Lo Dayenu!” It was never enough. She always left me wanting another conversation, another adventure, another dream. It was never enough.”

I know of a professor who is widely regarded as a star in his discipline. His insights are unfailingly creative, wide-ranging and fascinating. He has written extensively. He is quoted constantly by other scholars. Students flock to his classes. But when he was not asked to contribute to an anthology in a neighboring field, he raged over the slight for days convinced that his contributions are utterly unrecognized.

I heard this morning on the radio that Mike Tyson is filing for chapter 11 bankruptcy. Although he has earned \$300 million in the ring, “my finances are in a shambles,” he says.

How much is enough? How much wealth, how much recognition, how much friendship, how much piety is enough?

In the Talmud is a story about recognition. It is a special obligation to care for the needs of those who lose their wealth. They must be restored to their previous dignified status. It is said that Rabbi Hillel the elder would provide such people with a horse to ride upon as well as a servant to run before them. Once Rabbi Hillel could not acquire a servant, so he ran before the one who had lost his wealth himself. (Talmud Ketubot 67b)

What are we to understand from this story? The man who had once been wealthy knew that Hillel was the spiritual leader of his community, a man known for his piety, humility and scholarship. Rabbi Hillel was not a servant. So how could this man permit Hillel to behave like a servant? And what about Hillel himself? He embodied the honor of his community. How could he have ignored his own status to fulfill the illusions of the man who had lost his wealth?

Rabbi Chayim Schmuelevitz was interested in honor. He comments on this story that the once wealthy man was sane and rational except when it came to his own honor. His appetite for honor was so voracious that it blinded his judgement, made him lose contact with reality. He was so in need of recognition that he believed that he deserved to have a famous rabbi dance before him. And Rabbi Hillel, filled with wisdom and compassion, made a judgment. He realized that for this man, honor was such a source of sickness, the absence of recognition was such a source of despair that his life was threatened. How often do we hear of people who cannot face the loss of wealth, of respect, of status and end their lives instead? Hillel chose to compromise his own honor in hopes of saving the other man's life.

But can someone ever really satisfy another person's need for honor? Worth comes from within, not from external circumstances. Rabbi Schmuelevitz describes the honor of "Dayenu"--a man who knows that whatever his circumstances, he has enough honor. Despite a decline from the ultimate heights to the depths, this man never loses his sense of royalty. When all that he owns is a walking cane, he considers himself monarch over his cane. His sense of dignity and self worth never leave him. They are not tied up in currency, but in confidence.

In the Samuel text in today's lectionary, we read about another monarch—over much more than a cane. King David comes to expect honor, power and love as his birthright. He wields them without regard for the dignity of or repercussions for others. When David saw Batsheva bathing and found her beautiful, he arranged for her to be brought to him. He took her and she became pregnant. But their liaison was not simple. Batsheva was married to Uriah. So David arranged for Uriah to lead David's troops in battle; David used his subject's loyalty against him and Uriah was killed in battle; now Batsheva was free to marry David. But such unbridled power could not go unchecked. God sent David's advisor Nathan to teach him that David had had enough—enough power, enough honor, enough praise, enough control over the lives of others. Nathan reaches David by a parable, describing a rich man who hoarded his own riches, but freely gave away the sole resource of a poor man. When David expresses outrage over such unfeeling excess, Nathan makes the connection to David's own behavior. David already had more than enough. Nevertheless, he took Batsheva. He denied Uriah his wife and ultimately his life. Enough was enough. David repented, and his life was spared, but the child of his unrestrained appetites was not.

Constraining appetite of another kind is addressed in the other story in today's lectionary. The children of Israel had just been saved from the Egyptians. They had sung

a song at the sea. They had been filled with gratitude. For a short time, they were proclaiming the equivalent of “Dayenu-it is enough” But before long, their stomachs start to grumble. You can almost hear the shouts of “Hooray, we’re free!” morphing into “Hey, let’s eat!” The children of Israel begin to complain. They wax nostalgic about the good old days in Egypt. So God tests them in a counterintuitive way. God tests them by providing miraculous food—bread from the skies. They are instructed that every day they can collect this surprising food called manna. Some were greedy and collected a great deal. Some were parsimonious and collected only a little. But one of the miracles of the food was that however much they collected, it always amounted to one omer, about two quarts. In other words, however disparate were the appetites of the collectors, the food God provided was enough. And those who tried to hoard, saving for the next day, awoke to find the manna, delicious and fresh a few hours earlier had spoiled, filled with worms and maggots. The test of the manna was to help the newly free people to learn how much is enough.

But the manna was not simply about amounts. It was also about satisfaction. The Midrash takes the sense of satisfaction one step farther than the Bible. The Midrash insists that whatever food one desired, the manna took on that taste. For children it tasted like mother’s milk. For strong youths it tasted like hearty bread. For the elderly it tasted like honey. For the sick, it tasted like barley soaked in oil and honey. Satisfaction is not objective. It is trained by attitude.

And the attitude of the children of Israel is not yet one of trust—despite the Exodus, despite the crossing of the sea, despite the victory over the Egyptians, despite the appearance of manna, sufficient for each day. The test of the manna is not finished. In the Bible, when it is Friday, the day before the Sabbath, the instructions for gathering the manna are changed. In contrast to the admonition not to collect manna for more than one day, Moses tells the children of Israel to collect two portions—one for Friday and one for the Sabbath. “And they left it until the morning, as Moses had commanded, and it did not stink, and there was not a worm in it.” (Exodus 16:24) Once again, they miscalculated what was enough. They went out to collect manna on the Sabbath, and there was nothing to collect. “And the Eternal said to Moses, “How long do you refuse to observe my commandments and my instructions? See that the Eternal has given you the Sabbath. On account of this God is giving you two days bread on the sixth day. Stay, each in his place. Let no man go out from his place on the seventh day.” (Ex. 16:28-29) Even though they had been told not to collect manna on Shabbat, they thought they did not have enough. They returned empty handed, but God’s response is an explicit commandment, “Let everyone remain where he is; let no one leave his place on the seventh day.” While the simple meaning of this restriction was to limit where people were physically on the Sabbath, the metaphoric meaning of the commandment is also a response to the test. The Sabbath exists for staying put—for intimacy, for reflections, for being genuinely present with oneself and with others. As scholar of Jewish mysticism Daniel Matt writes, “There is no need to leave your place, to go out and contend with the world. Nothing was required other than imagination.” He quotes Rabbi Shim’on bar Yohai, writing in the Zohar, the masterpiece of Jewish mysticism as teaching that the manna is a product of divine emanation, and that “some people are nourished by it even now”

Manna was substance, but its ability to satisfy was the food of imagination. Our appetites can be trained by the wisdom of Nathan, by the test of the manna. How one experiences satisfaction is determined not by the substance, but by the imagination. How much is enough is not an objective reality. For one friend, it is enough. For another, it is never enough. One once wealthy man can be satisfied with a cane symbolizing dignity. Another is not satisfied even with the most learned teacher dancing before him. Miraculous bread from heaven that tastes like a favorite food can be an occasion for hoarding or an occasion for being nourished by the here and now. Nothing is required other than imagination.

One of my favorite phrases in the daily Jewish liturgy is Sabenu m'tuvecha. "Satisfy us with your goodness." That there is goodness is a given. But every day we need to be reminded that our satisfaction is a choice. That there is goodness is a given. That it is enough for us is not a given. It is an act of the imagination. It is a process of being trained. Sabenu m'tuvecha. Satisfy us with your goodness. I could have more. But what I have is enough. May our imagination bring us to satisfaction. May we all be able to look at our lives, our desires for wealth, for friendship, for recognition, for food, and proclaim, "Dayenu". It is enough for us.