

Parashat B'ha'alot'cha -- June 9, 2012

Hazzan Neil Schwartz -- Agudas Israel

Parashat B'ha'alot'cha addresses issues of power and authority, and the difference between those two concepts. We **fear** power, and we **respect** authority. **God** and human **leaders** can **claim both** power and authority, but our ancient and modern **traditions provide authority**.

Using this differentiation, we can explore one use of language. We speak of “the power of tradition”, but I maintain that we really mean “the **authority** of tradition” most of the time. The question is whether or not we **respect that authority**. Here is how that plays out in today's Torah portion.

Authority is confirmed for the *Kohanim* and Levites as religious leaders once again during their purification rituals. According to Jewish tradition, God is the **Authority behind the laws** of the Torah, regardless of how that came to be. However, Moses and Aaron and the priests **convey** God's Authority to the Israelite People, and through the Oral Tradition that same authority is conveyed to us centuries later.

Here, **tradition is a source of authority** for how we should live our lives. When the Israelites complain about their diet of *mannah* in the Wilderness, God wields power in response by providing so many quail for meat that many Israelites get sick from stuffing themselves. When Miriam gossips about her brother Moses and slanders him, God punishes her with a skin disease. These are examples of **power that is to be feared**.

There is another use of the word “power” which is **descriptive**, and this has nothing to do with fearing that power. Another way this same phrase “the power of tradition” can be used descriptively is as a **response** to the swirling chaos of life. Here the concept of “power” does **not elicit fear**, but rather it **brings comfort**.

When we were scared as little kids, we went to our parents for comfort and protection from whatever was worrying us. What happens when we are scared as adults? To whom, or to what, can we turn for comfort when life and its events unsettle us?

Some groups of people turn to strong leaders when life becomes uncertain, voluntarily giving up their autonomy for the sake of the stability that such a leader brings to their lives. Nazi Germany was one such example; it rose to power in a highly educated country, where life after WW I had become too uncertain and chaotic for the German people to handle on their own.

We Jews by and large have not done that. There were a few centuries of monarchy in ancient Israel which arose partly in response to the uncertainty of life during the chaotic period of the Judges. However, that experiment with monarchy did not go well for us, and the Hasmonean kingdom established centuries later by the Maccabees was worse.

During the long centuries of persecution during the Diaspora, we have instead turned to our traditions and to our communities for that sense of security. Here I maintain we can use the phrase “the power of tradition” in the sense not of fear, but of **comfort**. Almost every time there has been a major upheaval in a segment of the Jewish community, it has been followed by a turn to tradition and the development of new traditions.

Here are some examples: during the years of the Crusades and the Black Death, persecution in Central Europe led to Jewish flight into Eastern Europe, where Jewish communities became insular as a form of self-protection. The Spanish Inquisition and the Expulsion from Spain in 1492 contributed to an upsurge in Kabbalistic mysticism, and the Chmelnitzki massacres of 1648 in the Ukraine contributed to belief in the false Messiah Shabbtai Tzvi a few years later. The collapse of that experience contributed to the rise of Hassidism in the mid-1700's, and the rise of the German Reform Movement during the Enlightenment brought the backlash of Orthodoxy being established as a formal Movement in Europe during the 1800's.

Now we are faced with a dual sense of vulnerability here in North America. For two centuries we have not had to worry about the chaos of the world directly affecting us, because it was “over there” in the Middle East or in Europe. Now we have had a full decade of terrorism here in North America, and that is unsettling some of us Jews.

It comes in two forms: while we get along well with our Muslim neighbors, there is no denying that some of the terrorism which frightens us is attributed to fundamentalist Muslims. However, one Jewish leader identified the shootings of an abortion doctor in Wichita and at the National Holocaust Museum as “Christian terrorism”, meaning that they were both motivated by a twisted version of fundamentalist Christianity.

So, if awareness of these recent events is beginning to unsettle us, can our ancient or modern traditions bring us comfort? Can we turn to each other as community for support and strength, and can we feel any sense of being cared for by God? Our traditions provide authority for living an upright life, and it is up to us whether or not to respect that authority in our own lives. Our traditions can also provide some stability and comfort in an uncertain time, if we are willing to give them a chance to do so. Let us turn to each other in community, and to our ancient and modern Jewish traditions.