

PARSHAT SHEMINI
APRIL 18, 2015
RABBI VERNON KURTZ

There is a custom amongst some Jews in the period after the holiday season of Tishri, and after Pesach as well, that is popularly called “Behab.” This word is the Hebrew acronym for the days of the week – Bet, Hey, Bet – Monday, Thursday, Monday. On the Monday, Thursday, Monday, following Sukkot and Pesach special penitential prayers are recited in the Synagogue. For many centuries, Jews also observed these days as fast days. Today, very few people observe these days in this manner and in our Congregation we don’t acknowledge them at all.

Among the reasons given for the observance of “Behab” is one that states that during these joyous holidays one is likely to have been guilty of excesses in behavior, eating, dress, and the pursuit of pleasure. As such, we should atone for those excesses by fasting and by the recitation of special penitential prayers. These prayers emphasize the great Jewish view of moderation in all areas of living and remind us that we should not show excesses in behavior, in public appearance, and in the use of the world’s natural resources.

This concept of moderation is a very important standard that is upheld by Judaism. The Greek philosopher Aristotle came to the conclusion that the ideal way of life is “the golden mean.” Happiness can come only from moderation. The ability to enjoy life comes from taking the middle road.

Maimonides, the Rambam, who was a devotee of the philosophy of Aristotle, used this concept as the rationale for all Jewish law. He believed that asceticism and hedonism both have no place in Judaism. We are to live our lives by taking advantage of all the resources that G-d has placed at our fingertips, and yet recognize, that living to excess is not only inappropriate, but in fact, it tends to distance us from G-d.

We can easily understand that while taking things to an excess, what might be called hedonism, is surely out of bounds in Judaism, but even asceticism is not praiseworthy. A Hasidic story relates that a young man came before his teacher and prided himself on his extremely pious behavior: “I always dress in white; I drink only water; I place tacks in my shoes for self-mortification. I roll naked in the snow; and I order the synagogue caretaker to give me forty lashes daily on my bare back.”

Just then a white horse entered the courtyard, drank water, and began rolling in the snow. “Observe,” said the Rabbi, “this creature is white; he drinks only water; it has nails in its shoes; it rolls in the snow; and receives more than forty lashes a day. Yet, it is nothing but a horse.” The lesson is clear, asceticism does not inherently make one more pious.

The lesson is also taught to us in a few weeks time when we read the story of the Nazir, the individual who takes a vow of asceticism upon himself. The Torah informs us

that he must live up to his vow, but at the end of his period of time he is to bring a sin offering. The Rabbis tells us that the sin offering is to remind us that unnecessary abstention, in this case of a person consecrating himself to G-d by abstaining from wine and strong drink, by not cutting his hair, by not coming into contact with a corpse, and by vowing to be an ascetic, is not only unnecessary but a sin.

Judaism believes that we should take advantage of this world and be thankful for all of our gifts. Therefore, there is an entire series of blessings which we recite when we eat, when we smell fragrant smells, when we see natural wonders, and when special occasions come our way.

Rabbi Shmuel Goldin tells the story of one of his first trips to Israel when he was taken around the museum by a guide. "You can deduce," the guide said, "common practice within a society from the legal edicts enacted by its government." Centuries from now," he continued to explain, "when the ruins of this museum are excavated, archeologists will not find signs in the rubble stating 'no bicycle riding.' Since it is not common practice in our day to ride bicycles through museums, legal postings prohibiting such behavior are not necessary."

"Excavators will, however, find 'no smoking' signs. This discovery will lead them to correctly surmise that smoking was likely to occur in public buildings during the 20th to 21st centuries and that the administrators of this museum moved to prevent such activity."

Rabbi Goldin uses this story to explain a particular injunction found in our Torah reading of this morning. After the horrible event in which Aaron's sons are killed by Divine fire, G-d instructs Aaron: "Drink no wine or other intoxicant, you or your sons, when you enter the Tent of Meeting, that you may not die. This is a law for all time throughout the ages." This is one of the rationales given for the death of Nadab and Abihu is that they were intoxicated when they entered G-d's presence. While we cannot prove this, it does make sense, for immediately after the event Aaron and his sons are instructed concerning the consumption of wine and intoxicating drink.

In many ancient cultures the use of alcohol and other psychoactive drugs was an integral component of religious rites. Rabbi Goldin suggests that banning alcoholic consumption in specific settings does not emerge solely from apprehension over alcohol's potentially debilitating effects. He suggests that wine did, and still does, occupy a particular place in religious ritual, especially in Judaism. "Had the Torah's only concern been for potential error on the part of the Kohanim, all intoxicating beverages would have been treated equally. By singling wine out for special attention, however, the Torah communicates that there is more to this prohibition than meets the eye. Wine used properly and in moderation, the Torah teaches, like all of G-d's physical creations, enhances our appreciation of the Divine."

In other words, wine and other intoxicating beverages are not in themselves evil. They are inappropriate when used to excess and in an improper place. Used in moderation and in an appropriate venue, they may find an honorable place in Jewish life.

All of us are trained at the earliest age to treat wine properly. We find it at our Shabbat table, at the Pesach Seder, at a Brit Milah, and at a wedding. In and of itself, wine is not evil. How it is used and where it is used, however, can lead to disastrous results.

Wine and strong drink are only some of the items that we should use in moderation. In the latter part of our Torah reading we are instructed concerning the dietary laws, the laws of Kashrut. Many of our sages believe that we are granted the ability to eat meat, something not granted to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, only as we agree to eat it in moderation and follow laws which curtail some of our base attitudes and appetites for it. Therefore, according to this view, Kashrut serves as a way to ennoble our eating habits, to show that we should not live simply to eat, but eat in order to live.

The Book of Leviticus also comments at length on our sexual habits. It reminds us that sex is not evil, as is seen in other religious movements. It is the source of all life, and life itself is holy. However, we are asked to curtail our sexual impulses, to properly use our sexual drives with appropriate respect for our partner and the principle of privacy.

In the world in which we inhabit where excess is seen all around us in food, drink, sex, and material possessions, no lesson could be more important. Judaism, as a religion and a culture, does not negate in any way our ability to behold the world as something good and to partake of it. Yet, for Maimonides the middle road is the essence of proper behavior, respect for G-d, for our fellow human being, and for being thankful for the gifts of this world. When we become ascetics or hedonists we do not live up to G-d's directives and to Judaism's teachings. When we use the gifts presented to us in a proper fashion then we recognize the blessings of this world and our place in it.

The pleasure that material goods can bring us is limited and often fleeting. It is our task to strive for greater purposes and teach that lesson to our children and grandchildren. Judaism continues to direct our lives from the Biblical narrative, to medieval philosophy, from Hasidic stories to modern interpretations. If we take these lessons to heart our lives will be better lived and the world will be a better place.