

Sermon on Parashat *Ekev*  
 Congregation Beth Shalom, Cambridge  
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I would like to speak to you about one verse from our *parasha*: Deuteronomy 8:3. This is a long and somewhat complex verse, but it contains one of the most familiar phrases of the Bible, *lo al ha-lehem levado yihyeh ha-adam*. The words are so simple and straightforward that even a beginner in Hebrew can render them: “Man does not live by bread alone.”

Last week, Peter Lipton gave a wonderful *devar Torah* about another six word phrase, even more familiar than ours today: Sh'ma Yisrael. What he did was to problematize what seems to be so obvious and straightforward, helping us to see the words as more complex than we thought. With our verse today, the syntax is unambiguous and the translation is fairly straightforward – except for the question whether to keep the gendered language (“Man does not live”) for reasons of literary style, or modify it: “Human beings do not live by bread alone,” or “people do not live...” I once heard a Chinese professor of religion comment that in translating the Bible into Chinese, one has to make a fundamental decision about whether to render the familiar verses, “Man does not live by bread alone,” or “Give us this day our daily bread,” or whether to render them Man does not live by rice alone, and Give us this day our daily rice. The Chinese word for bread—which as every Jew knows is non-existent in the Chinese diet—immediately suggests an alien culture, something that the Chinese will not think of as addressed to them. Do you keep the cultural markers of the original text, or render its meaning in terms familiar to the culture of the new reading community?

But let's take the familiar translation, and probe the question of meaning. I would like to illustrate the problems with reference to “**Context**.” If I were to ask you what is the meaning of this phrase, I'm quite certain that there would be a broad consensus reflecting the way it is generally understood. The provision of basic physical needs, the satiation of hunger, is not all there is to life; there is a spiritual dimension that makes “human beings” what they are. The continuation of the verse, as translated in the old JPS, based on the King James version, is “...but by everything that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live.” Here is what Hertz says in his commentary: “Physical food is not the only thing that ensures man's existence. Apart from the normal sustenance there are Divine forces which sustain man in his progress through life.” Fair enough.

Yet here is the verse in context – the *entire* verse, according to the (relatively) new JPS translation: “He (God) tested you by hardships to learn what was in our hearts; whether you would keep His commandments or not. He subjected you to the hardship of hunger, and then gave you manna to eat, which neither you nor your fathers had ever known, in order to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but that man may live on anything that the Lord decrees.” This translation makes it clear that we are not talking about the physical versus the spiritual. In the original context, it is about the wilderness experience as a test of obedience. God makes the people hungry, then He sends a strange, unfamiliar food down from the heaven, as a substitute for the familiar, reassuring bread that is no longer available to the people.

The purpose of the test was to see whether the people would follow God's instructions by eating the strange food, and thereby learn that they could satisfy their hunger and survive in a novel manner. That's the meaning of the verse in context. Very different from what we assume it to mean.

But let us take the more familiar meaning: the need for the spiritual dimension. Here too there is an important issue of context: not the context of its setting in the Bible, but the context of the contemporary audience. Let me illustrate this by sharing a joke. A priest walks out of the Vatican, and he sees two beggars sitting next to the gate, each with a pan to collect money. One wears a large Star of David, the other wears a large cross. Not surprisingly, the one with the cross collects many contributions from people walking in and out of the Vatican, while the one with the Star of David gets virtually nothing. Finally, the priest, observing this, walks over the man and says, I feel bad that you don't seem to be having much success, but you have to face reality – I would suggest that either you put away that Star of David, or find a different place in the city to sit. At which point the beggar turns to the other man with the large cross, and says, "Hey Schwartz, look who's giving us pointers on how to raise money!"

Is it a funny story? Maybe. But I suggest that its *meaning* depends very much on the context of audience. If this is told by a Jew to other Jews, it expresses the ingenuity of Jews to eke out a livelihood even in the most inhospitable environment. If it is told by an Irish Catholic to others in a Dublin pub, the meaning is probably quite different: those Jews will stoop to anything, even a sacrilegious deceit, in order to bilk Christians out of their money. And if a Jew were present in that Dublin pub, listening to the joke and its response, he would probably not find it funny at all.

To come back to our verse, "Man does not live by bread alone," I recall a wonderful elder colleague, Krister Stendhal, Professor of New Testament, Dean of Harvard Divinity School, once saying at a faculty colloquium, "This verse means something quite different when you quote it to a group of people who are wealthy, than it does when you quote it to a group of people who are hungry." To the wealthy, the message is, don't think that your gastronomic pleasures, your fine foods and expensive wines, your conspicuous consumption of consumer goods, are ultimately important. There is much more to life than this. That is a message we can probably identify with. Quoting the same verse to a group of the countless millions of people on this earth who go to bed hungry at night, who do not know where their next meal will come from, the meaning is quite different: don't complain that you don't have enough food; it's the spiritual realm that is most important – you will eventually get your reward in the spiritual realm for your suffering here on earth. And that is a message that I trust most of us would find repugnant.

Context is indeed important in determining meaning: both the context in the original source, and the context in audience being addressed. I cannot conclude without making an application of this point to the contemporary issue that has been so excruciatingly painful to many of us in the past few weeks: the devastating destruction and bloodshed in the north of Israel and in the south of Lebanon. I speak to you know as someone who has come to feel at home in this community over the past 5 years, not as someone making a statement to a reporter from the Guardian or the BBC. And I speak not as Principal of the Leo Baeck College, but as an individual

Jew, who has lived in Israel, loves Israel, has family and friends in Israel, visited there 3 times in the past 15 months, who cannot imagine a Jewish future without Israel. And if my remarks are out of order, you won't invite me to speak again.

So here, for what it is worth, in a few brief sentences, is how I have felt. I have no doubts that Hizbullah is an ideologically driven movement that represents a severe danger to Israel and that must not be allowed to operate with deadly weapons near Israel's borders. Its enmity toward Israel is not driven by solidarity with the Palestinians, or by concerns for Lebanese prisoners, or by border claims to the Sheba farms. Its enmity is to the existence of Israel as a Jewish State in what it considers to be the Islamic Middle East; its spokesmen cannot even bring themselves to mention the name of Israel, referring to rockets on cities in "northern Palestine."

And yet: the past four weeks have brought about the most painful wrenching of my conscience and identity as a Jew that I can remember, certainly since Sabra and Shatila 24 years ago. Not because of the military campaign against Hizbullah. But because of campaign against the Lebanese people and the Lebanese country that seems to have been waged alongside that campaign:

- the bombing of the international airport that made evacuation of foreigners so much more difficult,
- the destruction of power plants and oil tanks that has created an environmental catastrophe extending throughout the northwest Mediterranean,
- the bombing of bridges and roads that has made relief work for the civilian population all but impossible,
- the destruction of milk plants in the Bekaa valley,
- the dropping of leaflets to warn the civilian population to leave an area, followed by attacks against a convoy of cars heading north.

The policy seems to have been, we will attack Hizbullah, but we will also destroy the infrastructure of the country and make life so miserable for the Lebanese people that they will rise up and throw Hizbullah out. And that policy seems to me to be misguided and counterproductive, in addition to being immoral, and possibly illegal – a form of collective punishment that simply should not be tolerated.

Would I sign an advertisement in the British Press that stated this? No. Would I join an anti-Israel rally, despite these deep misgivings? No. Why not? Because of the problem of context. When we say these things in the context of people whose love of Israel is deep and whose commitment is absolute, they mean one thing. If we were to say them in the context of people who never have anything positive to say about Israel, who find its very existence an embarrassment or a scandal, it means something quite different. This is not hypocrisy; it is a realization that context is crucial. We would never say to a Lebanese refugee family that has lost its home and all its possessions, "Don't worry, remember, Man does not live by bread alone."

We weep over the loss of civilian life on both sides of the border,

- over the families devastated by multiple deaths,
- over the children maimed for life,
- over the homes demolished,
- over the dreams of co-existence shattered, at least for the present.

At this agonizing time, we pray that the madness will soon end, and we will awaken from this nightmare to a new dawn, when the Bread of Affliction will no longer be consumed in the Middle East. But at present, we read, chastened, the verses that follow this morning's text: "Bear in mind that the Lord your God disciplines you just as parent disciplines their child. Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God; walk in His ways and revere Him." (8:5-6).