

Beha'alotecha 5786

June 6, 2026

Responding to Winnie Rappaport and Ari Goodman

Ari and Winnie, thank you for two insightful and complementary divrei Torah. You both were intrigued by the people's craving for the foods they had back in Egypt. Even when they had manna, they wanted more, they wanted different, they wanted what they had before. Ari, you noticed that they called the food in their reminiscences "free", and you pointed out that it was not at all free, given that they were enslaved in hard labor for it. You built on this idea to talk about the danger of thinking that anything comes to you for free. As you teach us, everything has a cost, whether obvious or hidden, and you make the case that it is better to work hard in life to earn the things you have.

Winnie, you also focused on the manna, and at first you read the Israelites' longing as dissatisfaction with what they have, as greed. You related it to the ways that we are awash in advertising and consumer culture that evokes in us a feeling of not having the right thing even when we have plenty. That would have already been a meaningful d'var Torah, but then, in your curiosity and empathy, you found another layer of meaning, seeing in the Israelites a mirror of people today – asylum seekers and others – who feel anxiety and insecurity about whether they will have enough to eat. You bring us inside the experience of a person who has to beg for food every day, who wakes up in the morning not knowing if they or their children will eat. And you remind us of Maimonides's laws of tzedakah, that require us to provide food for a person who is hungry and that call upon us to go a level higher and provide a means for that person to secure their own sustenance into the future, and even higher to enable them to give tzedakah themselves.

Ari and Winnie, your messages are related. You both want people to be able to sustain themselves. You both recognize that freedom in Judaism means responsibility – for ourselves and for each other. It is not an accident that just 50 days after they walk out of slavery, our ancestors are expected to join a brit, a covenant, with G-d. The nature of the brit is responsibility. Becoming free from enslavement means not the end but the beginning of responsibility. It is only when we are free to make our own choices that we can be responsible. The

entire Torah is a guide for how, in freedom, to take responsibility for oneself and for one's society.

Your words, Winnie, reminded me of three verses in Deuteronomy, in Parashat Re'eh, that seem to contradict each other.

אָפֶס כִּי לֹא יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֶבְיֹן

There shall be no needy among you
If you keep all of these mitzvot

כִּי־יִהְיֶה בְּךָ אֶבְיֹן

But if there is a needy person among you
do not harden your heart and shut your hand
Rather, you must open your hand and lend whatever is sufficient to meet the
need.

כִּי לֹא־יִחַדֵּל אֶבְיֹן מִקְּרֵב הָאָרֶץ

For there will never cease to be needy ones in your land.

At first this seems to make no sense – how can it be that there will be no needy among you and there will never cease to be needy among you? But on a deeper look it makes perfect sense. If everyone lives with responsibility for their neighbors, for their society, there'll be nobody who is hungry. But, if you encounter someone who is hungry, give. But because we can't yet assume that everyone will live by this ideal all of the time, you should expect that there will always be people who are hungry. Walk through the world with that expectation. In other words, you are to hold your desired future and today's reality in your mind at the same time. We're aiming for a world in which no one is hungry. We're living in a world in which people are hungry. We don't give up on our responsibility to bring that desired future. And neither do we give up on our responsibility for the person in front of us today. And that responsibility applies to care for someone who's lived here their whole lives and to someone who arrived recently seeking asylum, a home where they can work hard and raise their family. This is a point of connection to your words, Ari, for as we know, many of the people who are in the crosshairs of this administration are ready and willing to work hard, or are already working hard, to both feed their families and make this country stronger.

Furthermore, Ari, your words reminded me of how much guidance our tradition gives us about how to take responsibility for our freedom. As you taught us, freedom, it never comes for free. People have to work for it. Voting every two or four years is the bare minimum, and not enough to sustain the fabric of a healthy society. A healthy society requires working hard for the common good and not just to enrich ourselves. A healthy society requires taking the effort to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. As Winnie taught us, it requires taking responsibility to make sure that no one is dehumanized by food insecurity or poverty. And a healthy society requires civil discourse, the ability to discuss controversial questions with one another in a constructive way. This is something we've allowed to decay in our society, but which our Sages' understood and taught as the very foundation of a healthy life.

There are three stories in the Talmud that teach us how to do this, and I'm going to tell you them in brief. First, many people know about Hillel and Shammai. These two schools almost never agreed. They argued about everything, and they are held up as a model for how to argue. It is said that they argued "for the sake of heaven," which means that they didn't argue to win, they argued to better understand, to try to arrive at the greater good. One time they were arguing and a voice came out of heaven that said, "These and these are the words of the living G-d." In other words, multiple truths can exist simultaneously, which means that diverse positions, positions you disagree with, merit generous listening with curiosity and the desire to learn. The voice from heaven continued and said that the law would follow Hillel. Why would the law follow Hillel? Because his school demonstrated exemplary kindness, humility, and even when they were insulted they did not insult back.

Second story: Resh Lakish was a bandit and a gladiator. Rabbi Yohanan was a scholar who convinced Resh Lakish to give up the life of the sword to study Torah. They became chevruva, best friends and study partners. One day they were arguing about the ritual purity of swords, and Resh Lakish was winning the argument when Yohanan said "well, a thief knows his trade." In other words, "no wonder you know about swords. You used to be a robber." This personal attack hurt Resh Lakish so much that he got sick and died. Yohanan was so bereft he couldn't stop wailing, the other rabbis sent him a new study partner, but it didn't work. Yohanan said, "When I stated a law to Resh Lakish, he would raise 24

objections, and I would give 24 answers, and the truth would emerge! You just tell me 'Your words are correct!'" In the end Yohanan lost his mind from grief. This intense and tragic story has so many lessons. First of all, arguing, when done right, is a path to truth. Second, shaming a person is so damaging it's like death. Third, when we allow ourselves to degrade the dialogue, we all lose out. It's something worth grieving.

Final story: there was a rabbi named Eliezer who had special powers. All of the rabbis were arguing about a particular oven and whether it was pure. To show that he was right, Eliezer made a tree move, then he made a stream flow backwards, then he made the walls of the study hall they were sitting in tilt inward. Finally a voice called out from heaven, saying that Eliezer was right. But the other rabbis were in the majority and their arguments were based in reason, not miracles. They overruled Eliezer even though G-d was on his side. But then something catastrophic happened. Because he refused to submit to the majority rule, the other rabbis excommunicated Eliezer, shunning him and cutting him off from the community. His pain and anger were so great that everything he looked at burned to ash, and when he poured out his pain to G-d, the head of the rabbinic court, Rabban Gamliel, died. The lessons of this story are important for us as well. First of all, being more powerful than others doesn't mean you win the argument. The argument is not ruled by power but by reason, by what will lead to the greatest good. Second, the majority rules. A single person or a minority – even if they have G-d on their side – should not rule over a majority. Third, when a minority is defeated in an argument, even when feelings are strong, the majority must not shun, humiliate, or punish the minority. The losing minority must be treated with care and compassion, and both sides must remain in relationship and dialogue with one another, or else everything will be destroyed.

So, taken together, here is some guidance from our tradition about how to nurture a healthy society.

- 1) Understand that freedom takes hard work from everyone all the time.
- 2) Take responsibility for your neighbors and look for ways to care for them.
- 3) Give readily to those in need and support their ability to sustain themselves.
- 4) Argue about the important issues of the day in a way that leads to increased understanding of the truth and the greater good.

- 5) Listen when you don't agree, with generosity, curiosity, humility, and the desire to learn.
- 6) When arguing, never insult, shame, or degrade others with your words.
- 7) Stay connected to people you disagree with.
- 8) If you're in the minority, even if you're more powerful, submit to the judgments of the majority.
- 9) When you're in the majority or have more power, treat the minority with honor, care, and compassion, and always hold that their perspective also has truth.
- 10) And finally, going all the way back to the story of the manna, be grateful for all that you have, and when it is enough, know that it is enough.

Ari and Winnie, thank you for reminding us that no matter where we stand in life, no matter how old or young we are, there are things we can do to take responsibility for our freedom and to build our way to a compassionate community, a functioning democracy, a healthy society, and a thriving future for ourselves and for the generations yet to come.

Shabbat Shalom.