

Torah of Sustenance for 2019

WHERE WE ARE TODAY

“It is now two years that there has been famine in the land...”
(Genesis 45:6)

“A time is coming—declares my Lord THE ETERNAL—when I will send a famine upon the land: not a hunger for bread or a thirst for water, but for hearing the words of the ETERNAL. Men shall wander from sea to sea and from north to east to seek the word of the ETERNAL, but they shall not find it.”
(Amos 8:11-12)

כִּי זֶה שְׁנַתִּים הָרָעֵב בְּקֶרֶב הָאָרֶץ...
...the famine is in the land...

הִנֵּה יָמִים בָּאִים נְאֻם אֲדֹנָי ה' וְהִשְׁלַחְתִּי רָעֵב בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא רָעֵב לֶחֶם וְלֹא צָמָא לַמַּיִם כִּי אִם לְשִׁמְעַת אֶת דְּבָרֵי ה': וְנָעוּ מַיִם עַד יָם וּמִצְפוֹן וְעַד מִזְרַח יִשׁוּטְטוּ לְבַקֵּשׁ אֶת דְּבַר ה' וְלֹא יִמָּצְאוּ:
...for they shall not find it...

- In what ways does “famine” feel like an apt metaphor for our present national circumstances? In what ways does it not work for you?
- What do you think is the “word of the ETERNAL” our society is lacking today?

Midrash Genesis Rabbah 25:3

Ten years of famine came to the world... [after listing nine in biblical times] and one in the [messianic] future [quoting Amos 8:11, above].

Rabbi Huna and Rabbi Jeremiah said in the name of Rabbi Shmuel bar Rav Yitzchak: The real famine was not meant to be in David's day but in Saul's, but Saul was a “dry sycamore branch¹,” so the Holy Blessed One pushed [the famine] off and brought it in David's day.

They offered a parable: Should Shilo sin and Yohana pay? How could that be? Rabbi Hiyya the Great said this may be compared to a glassmaker who had a display-case full of glasses. When he wanted to hang it up, he took a stake and stuck it in [a wall] and hung on it, and then he would hang his case. In the same way, [the famines] didn't come in the days of weak people but of heroes who can withstand them.

Rabbi Berechya would recite upon them [Isaiah 40:29, incorporated into *birkot hashachar*, the daily morning blessings], “[Blessed are You]...who gives strength to the weary.”

עֲשֵׂה שְׁנֵי רַעֲבוֹן בְּאוֹ לְעוֹלָם... וְאֶחָד לְעֵתִיד לְבֵא שְׁנֵי אֲמָר (עֲמוֹס ח')...
...and one in the future...

רַבִּי הוֹנָא וְרַבִּי יִרְמְיָהּ בְּשֵׁם רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בְּרַב יִצְחָק עֵיקָר אוֹתוֹנְטִיָּא שְׁלוֹ לֹא הִיָּה רַאוּי לְהִיּוֹת בִּימֵי דוּד אֲלֵא בִּימֵי שְׂאוּל, אֲלֵא עַל יְדֵי שְׂהִיָּה שְׂאוּל גְּרוּפִית שֶׁל שְׂקָמָה גִּלְגְּלוּ הַקַּב"ה וְהִבִּיאוּ בִּימֵי דוּד,
...the real famine was not meant to be in David's day but in Saul's...

מִתְּלָא אֲמַרִּין, שִׁילוֹ חֲטָא וְיוֹחָנָא מִשְׁתַּלְמָא? אַתְמָהָא! אֲמַר רַבִּי חֵיָּא רַבָּה מִשְׁל לְזַגְג שְׁהִיָּה בִידוֹ קוּפָה מְלִיָּאָה כּוֹסוֹת וְדִיִּטְרוּטִין, בְּשַׁעָה שְׁהִיָּה מִבְּקֵשׁ לְתַלּוֹת אֶת קוּפְתוֹ הִיָּה מְבִיָּא יֶתֶד וְתַקְעָה וְנִתְלָה בֵּה וְאַחַר כֵּךְ הִיָּה תוֹלָה קוּפְתוֹ, לְפִיכֵךְ לֹא בְּאוֹ בִּימֵי בְנֵי אָדָם שְׁפוּפִים אֲלֵא בִּימֵי בְנֵי אָדָם גְּבוּרִים שְׁהֵן יְכוּלִין לְעֲמוּד בְּהֵן,
...how could that be? Rabbi Hiyya the Great said this may be compared to a glassmaker who had a display-case full of glasses...

רַבִּי בְּרַכְיָה הוּוֹה קָרִי עֲלֵיהוֹן נוֹתֵן לִיעָף כַּח.
...who gives strength to the weary.

- How do you feel that we are dealing today with problems that were put off in the past?
- What makes you feel like a “hero” capable of withstanding this “famine”? What makes you feel like a “dry sycamore branch”?
- How could you use Rabbi Berechya's blessing as a spiritual tool in this time?
- Many people find the theology of “God doesn't give you anything you can't handle” quite troubling. Do you see that theology being expressed in this midrash, or do you interpret it differently?

¹Considered an inferior wood; see Isaiah 9:9, “Sycamores have been felled— We'll grow cedars instead!” and JT *Avodah Zarah* 40:3.



HOW WE (MIGHT) MOVE FORWARD

“Neighbors and Neighborly Relations,” by Rabbi Nina Beth Cardin,
in *The Observant Life* (The Rabbinical Assembly, New York, 2012), pp. 713-715.

If you live near me and I live near you, we make claims on each other. This is so, no matter how we feel about each other...You might ask why: why should the fact that I live near you bind us in any particular way?...

The first answer is rooted in the story of creation...I carry a bit of the Divine in me just as you carry a bit of the Divine in you. And the Divine is something we cannot ignore. Just as God's presence in our lives demands a response from us, so too does our presence in the lives of each other...

In the presence of the other, we cannot argue that we did not know. In my presence, you and your claims are right there before me. I dare not turn away from you, for I am your witness, even as you are mine whether we have chosen to be so or not. Emmanuel Levinas, the eminent philosopher and Talmudist, speaks of “face” as the symbol of the unique, unknowable, invaluable aspect of each individual. “The epiphany of the face is ethical” and “The face opens the primordial discourse whose first word is obligation.”...

But modernity (or, more precisely, manufacturing and technology) has changed the meaning of “neighborhood” in our world...We are beginning to appreciate the ways in which telecommunications and the ubiquitous access to the Internet through our mobile devices can diminish, expand, or otherwise alter our experience of space and thus redefine “neighborliness.”

- What from this text resonates with you as a framework for moving forward? What's missing?
- How can we overcome the distance that separates us from key others in our society (be they immigrants at the border, CEOs in boardrooms, voters in other states, etc.) so that Levinas' concept of “face” has a chance to influence us?

“Different Modes of Allyship,” by Yavilah McCoy, *Sh'ma Now*,
October 2018. <https://forward.com/shma-now/areivut/412681/different-modes-of-ally-ship/>

The rise in antisemitism in this country is real and must be vigorously addressed by all of our allies. And, we must remain aware that it is generally not my Jewish siblings who are being criminalized for seeking safe-haven as refugees to this country. Social justice ally-ship is not a zero-sum game where the choice of allies is to be either with or against any one group. I have always tried to figure out how to stand with my people, Black and Jewish, while not allowing privilege to provide me entry through doors that other targeted individuals cannot easily access.

In the current climate, I am not sure how we can successfully fight the binaries of extremism without taking the risk of opening our Jewish boundaries for partnership to include more than what seems immediately safe or congruent to our direct needs. For me, ally-ship is about remembering our history and the risk-taking of the privileged who saved many of us, whether it was in service to our allies to help us or at their peril.

- Where do you see this text aligning with the previous one? Diverging from it?
- Do these texts help you see a clearer way forward for yourself in the coming years?