

**Behaalotecha**  
**June 9, 2012**  
**Does God love McDonalds?**  
**By Rabbi Alan B. Lucas**

There is outrage amongst the people. How dare they tell us what to eat, what to drink! We thought the whole point of freedom was so that we could make our own choices. We thought the whole point of our way of life was that we had to take responsibility for our own lives – down with those who want to limit our freedoms! Down with those who would tell us what to eat and drink. The revolution was all about freedom from tyranny – we did not elect leaders to dictate how we should live and what we should eat.

So, this is a rant against Mayor Bloomberg and his recent assault on sugary soft drinks? Actually no – I was paraphrasing the opening verses of chapter 11 of the book of *Bamidbar*, a section from today's torah portion *B'haalotecha*. Ain't it grand when the torah reads like a New York Times article?

*Va'yehi ha'am k'mitonanim ra b'aznei adonai...* “The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord...” What were the people complaining about? Food! Here they were in the wilderness and all they had to eat was manna – they remembered “the good old days” back when they were slaves – at least they had a variety of choices and four square. This is not what they bargained for at all!

In other words, the source of the complaining, the heart of their displeasure seems to be that they had thought that their freedom would bring them more choices – an ability to do what they wanted, when they wanted to do it – to eat what they wanted when they wanted to eat it - -and instead it seems to be bringing them fewer choices. And they are angry.

At the core of our anger over Mayor Bloomberg's proposal to get us to limit our intake of sugary drinks and at the core of our ancestors anger in today's *parasha* seems to be a fascinating debate over the nature of freedom – one that has still not been resolved and we are more than 3000 years into this experiment.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the 18<sup>th</sup> century philosopher whose writings on political philosophy influenced the French Revolution, wrote: “I am going to take men as they are and law as it ought to be...”

It seems that the torah, and Mayor Bloomberg would agree with this approach – but many of us are not so sure – and our ancestors, who complained back in the wilderness in today's *parasha* – were certainly not sold on this idea.

“I am going to take men as they are and law as it ought to be.” This was not God's initial approach to managing the world. As we read the early chapters of the bible it is clear that God initially wanted to approach man as we ought to be – and if we would and if we could live up to our potential there would be no need for law at all.

The Garden of Eden assumes that we humans could manage our own affairs. We were placed in a magnificent garden and told to enjoy ourselves – with one simple rule given to us by the Garden's manager. Well you know how that turned out. And things only went downhill from there. The first two brothers in human history – and one of them ends up murdering the other.

And soon things are so bad, that God has no choice but to bring the flood – wipe the slate clean and begin all over again.

But as Chancellor Arnie Eisen, who taught here at TBS this past Thursday night in the final session of the 10<sup>th</sup> year of our JTS Torah Class pointed out – what is interesting about God's second attempt to restart the world after the flood – is that God does not begin with a new and improved human. Adam 1.0 fails miserably. But God does not try again with Adam 2.0 – a new and improved model that does not have the flaws of the original human beings – quite the contrary – after the flood it is not man who changes – it is God.

What changes after the flood is not human ability, but divine expectation. Same old man – new approach.

What happens right after the flood – is that God seems to have learned that we are never going to learn -- that left to our own devices – it is our nature to screw things up. So God says – I am going to help. I am going to give you laws and guidelines to help you make the right choices – I am going to tell you what I expect you to do – in the hope that you will use your freedom in accordance with MY divine will and make this world work. Or as Rousseau would put it some thousands of years later, “I am going to take men as they are and law as it ought to be.”

And so God gave us the torah.

What was amazing about the flood is not that it was a learning moment for man – but that it was a learning moment for God! The world became so corrupt that it was beyond repair – and still it did not dawn on us that we were going to have to change – but it did dawn on God that God was going to have to change.

When God creates the universe – God has such high hopes for us. We are clearly the crown of God's creation – we are the most nearly divine thing that God creates. We are supposed to be God's partner to embrace God's vision and bring it to fruition here on earth. But God's greatest and worst decision – was the one that gave us free will. Free will made us unique. Free will gave us the potential for bringing great good and great beauty into God's world. But at the same time it gave us the potential for bringing great evil and great ugliness into God's world.

When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden- God had no doubt we would use our free will to bring great good and great beauty into the world. After our failure – God now has doubt – but remains convinced we will still get our act together – that good will triumph over evil.

After the flood – God no longer has any illusions about man – God now knows that left to ourselves we will destroy ourselves and the world.

So, as Chancellor Eisen taught us – God gave us the torah to guide us and constrain us. But, we don't like to be told what to do and we certainly don't like constraints: *Va'yehi ha'am k'mitonanim ra b'aznei adonai...* “The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord...” as it says in today's torah reading.

Chancellor Eisen has become known for his introduction into our contemporary vocabulary of the concept of the “sovereign self” – the notion that in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the most important value is not community, not torah, not law – but the self. The self has become sovereign in 2012 – we want to make our own choices, our own decisions – we resent any and all constraints over our ability to do what we want to do when we want to do it. And so it is not at all surprising that the Center for Consumer Freedom a restaurant trade group, took out a full page add in the *New York Times* with a picture of Bloomberg in a dress and the caption: “The Nanny: You only *thought* you lived in the land of the free.”

Now let there be no mistake about my position here today. I do not know if Mayor Bloomberg’s attempt to ban sugary drinks in portions over 16 ounces is a good idea or a bad one. I am leaning toward thinking it has more flaws than benefits – but the attack on Mayor Bloomberg is not that it is a bad idea but that it is un-American and that worries me. It is part of a larger debate going on in our country that worries me even more.

There is a segment of the right wing of contemporary political debate that argues that government is bad. That any governmental intrusion in our lives is wrong – and the ideal for which they stand would have as little government as possible – so we can have the maximum personal freedoms to do what we want. *Va’yehi ha’am k’mitonanim ra b’aznei adonai...* “The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord...”

Friends, we’ve seen this movie before - and it does not have a happy ending. Look - we can debate whether the Mayor’s proposed ban on sugary soft drinks is a good idea or not – but to debate whether government should intrude on our lives could be the most dangerous debate of the current political season.

“Are we not capable stewards of our own welfare?” ask the Libertarians. Well my friends – that is indeed an interesting question. One that God asked at the very outset of our bible. God wanted us to be capable stewards of our own welfare. God wanted us to be capable stewards of the whole planet. God still has hopes that we will one day learn how to be capable stewards both of our own lives and the lives of others. But that day is not today – we need law to guide us and constrain us because without guidance and without constraint – we have a record of destroying ourselves and the world.

So the challenge seems to be to find the right balance – Prohibition seemed to be a little too much constraint – but does anyone want to argue that the government’s tax on cigarettes and the attempt to get people to stop smoking and the thousands upon thousands of lives it has saved – is not a legitimate use of law? I am not crazy about wearing a seat belt – very constraining – in all meanings of the word. Yet, I do – because the government made sure my car has one and I will get a ticket if I do not use it. Is there any debate that we are better off – because of those constraints on our freedom?

Here is what Frank Bruni wrote in a recent *New York Times* editorial: “We’re fat, folks. Seriously, dangerously fat. And you don’t need statistics to tell you that; you just need to look around... When this many people are this overweight, you have not only an epidemic. You have a new normal, a context in which each obese person is less likely to recognize and appreciate the magnitude of his or her health problem because it’s entirely unexceptional.” A mathematician with the National Institutes of Health said that after crunching various numbers, he had concluded that the single best explanation for the obesity epidemic was the

hyper-efficient overproduction of food, which has made it cheaper and encouraged its sale and consumption in portions much heftier than those of yesteryear. The Double Whopper is the new normal, and so is the 32-ounce Sprite.

And so Mayor Bloomberg tried to do something about it.

Here is what the NY Times wrote:

“The NY1 local news station was one nonstop vox populi of citizens baying that Bloomberg was a tyrant whose real motivation was to wield control over as much of our lives as possible.”

Here is what the Torah wrote:

*Va'yehi ha'am k'mitonanim ra b'aznei adonai...* “The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord...”

Here is what Rousseau wrote:

“I am going to take men as they are and law as it ought to be”

When God created the world, God had high hopes that McDonald's would do the right thing, the responsible thing, the healthy thing. But, eventually God had to deal with His disappointment and he gave us the torah to guide us and restrain us.

The Sovereign Self is a false idol.

Freedom, our ancestors had to learn was not about doing what you want whenever you want to. We need help. We need guidance and we need restraint. I don't know whether a ban on sugary drinks will make this a better world – but I do know that we need good government – not less government in our lives and we need good torah – not less torah in our lives.

So stop complaining!