

The Boring Parts of the Torah

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Years ago, Rabbi Arthur Waskow wrote a commentary on this week's Torah portion. He called it, "The Boring Part of the Torah." If a rabbi calls a Torah portion "boring," it must really be a yawn!

On one level, it's true. The portion for this Shabbat could cure insomnia. For several weeks already, we've been reading about the construction of the Tabernacle, the portable Temple that the Israelites carried with them through their wanderings in the desert. This week, once again, we have more of the same — an exhaustive list of the building materials, a detailed description of the construction, and all the particulars of the dedication — fascinating reading if you're an ancient Israelite Priest, but pretty exhausting for the rest of us. Adding insult to injury, this picayune subject is the focus of all but one or two of the last fifteen chapters of the Book of Exodus, and four out of five consecutive weekly portions. Most years, this week's portion and last week's are combined, but we are now in a leap year, so the story is fully dragged out.

When I became a Bar Mitzvah, 34 years ago, I had a differently, but equally "boring," portion; so I asked the rabbi if I couldn't just read something else. The Torah is filled with intriguing stories and inspiring directives, many of them highly concentrated in just a few weekly portions. Why couldn't we just spread those "good" parts through the year, and skip the "boring" parts of the Torah? Reform Judaism departs from the tradition in many other significant arenas. Shouldn't a committee of learned

and creative rabbis study the entire Torah, select the most moving passages, and assign those to the weeks of the year?

The justifications for adopting this new procedure are legion. Not only could we avoid boredom, we could also skip over passages that seem totally irrelevant to modern Judaism. Out would go chapter upon chapter from Leviticus, all about animal sacrifice in the ancient Temple. We could even avoid the Bible's unequal treatment of women and its sections condoning slavery. Best of all, we could excise selections that are repugnant to us. We would eschew, for example, the stoning of the rebellious son and God's requirement for a war against idolaters; that we utterly destroy all men, women, children, and even the livestock; that "lying with a man as you would lie with a woman" is an "abomination." Some parts of the Torah aren't just "boring," but downright despicable, or so it seems.

So why don't we simply select more felicitous sections and leave out the others? Many would argue that we must consider K'lal Yisrael, the world-wide community of the Jewish people. There is great value in knowing that the very same Torah portion is being read this Shabbat at Agudath Achim and Chabad around the corner and at synagogues throughout the world, be they Orthodox, Conservative or Reform, in Jerusalem, Buenos Aries or Bentonville. If we changed our Torah readings, we would not just be departing from thousands of years of tradition, but we would be separating from our fellow Jews.

On the other hand, Reform Judaism has departed from Jewish tradition and other Jews in many important arenas. With proper study and commitment, we sometimes conclude that greater needs and

principles require us to develop our own, distinctly Reform approach to Judaism. We may even argue that this willingness to change the tradition is the leading hallmark of Reform Judaism.

Perhaps, though, there is a more profound reason for us to maintain the traditional Torah reading cycle. Let's reflect for a moment on the writings of Rabbi Waskow, who composed that commentary, "The Boring Part of the Torah." You might have guessed at his conclusion. There is no truly boring, superfluous, or extraneous part of the Torah. There are, however, some portions that challenge us to work harder, to examine closely, to get beyond our boredom to find the great kernels of wisdom.

Allow me to offer three brief examples of the bright sparks that light up this week's "boring" portion.

What's most tiresome about this portion is that it repeats quite a few specifics about the tabernacle from three and four weeks ago. In those portions, *Terumah* and *Tetzaveh*, God commands the gifts that are to be brought and the dimensions of all that is to be built. In this week's portion, *Pekudei* – like last week, in *Vayakhel* – we are told that the Israelites did as they were commanded. Indeed, even in Amanda's brief reading tonight, the same phrase appears twice, "Just as Adonai had commanded Moses." Suffice it to say those aren't the only two times that phrase appears in *Pekudei*.

The portion stirs us to contemplate the virtue of obedience. All of us are aware of the dangers of too much obedience; after all, Nazi criminals claimed, not entirely without justification, that they were "following orders." Still, in balance, obedience is an important *middah*, what our Jewish ethical tradition, Mussar, calls a "soul-trait."

Obedience is a virtue. When we are faithful to our marital vows, we are practicing obedience. When we are loyal to a decision of a Board on which we serve, even if we voted against the outcome, we are practicing appropriate obedience. When we follow the reasonable directive of our work supervisor, even if not our own first choice, we are calling upon the soul-trait of obedience. The Israelites' obedience in building the tabernacle is perhaps the key point of *Parashat Pekude*.

At the very end of Exodus, which I plan to read tomorrow morning, God's Presence fills the Tent of Meeting, and Moses cannot enter. If Moses can't be where God is so totally present, then surely no lesser mortal can. But isn't God everywhere, and doesn't God's power pervade all time and space?

Maybe the Torah is suggesting something else. If God were truly all-powerful, we would have no power, and therefore could not exercise free will. God must withdraw a bit, if humans are to be truly present. God is always there, hovering like the cloud over the Tabernacle. But God does not intervene in every moment of our lives, protecting us from danger and saving us from ourselves. God cannot totally inhabit the tabernacles of our own lives – for if God did, then, like Moses, we would be unable to enter, to act, in short, to be fully human.

Finally, let's meditate on that cloud over the Tabernacle, providing shade by day, the warmth and light of fire by night. We may not be blessed with such tangible evidence of God's presence, and yet the message is clear: God can be alive for us in a variety of ways, depending upon our needs. Our God can be stern when we turn astray, and forgiving as we return; comforting when we are in pain, and inspiring when we are on the move. God is not limited to any one form or image or role in our lives.

Rather, God provides shade when we're too bright and warmth when our world is cold. Is that the message of a "boring" Torah portion?

Come to think of it, Torah portions are rather like people. Some are immediately attractive and interesting to us, others boring, and some obnoxious. Still, each human soul is created in the image of God. That piece of godliness is easier to find in some people than in others. More difficult people, like less attractive Torah positions, require us to search more deeply, to find the good, to embrace it, and to learn from it.

So let us look very carefully into the words of a boring chapter of Torah, and let us search deeply into the heart of a person we at first find difficult. There may we find a teaching, a truth, that nobody else has ever seen. There may we discover a spark of God that we never expected. Then, we may even find that the "boring" parts of the Torah are also the most inspiring.

Amen.