

Romemu Dvar Torah June 10, 2016

We are assaulted daily by products and people who make a claim on us, saying we need them. We can't live without them. We're incomplete if we don't compete.

We need it, you want it, you know you want it. The double bind of living in a culture where the work of the system that we live in is to create need, so that we become consumers for both things that we do need and things that we don't, is a double bind in that the promise of fulfillment through their products would ostensibly put them out of business. The problem with desire is that when it is fulfilled, it births another desire.

As our Buddhist friends would say, desires are endless, we vow to complete them. We put an end to them. There's a commercial that I've seen, some of you have seen this commercial, it kind of reminds me of this.

It's a beer commercial, right, and there's this handsome guy, I'm sure you may have seen him, surrounded by women, and he's the most interesting man in the world. Have you seen this commercial? He's the most interesting man in the world, and he's jumping out of planes, and he's a scuba diver, and he's like, he is the most interesting man in the world, right? And then he peeks at you from behind his Dos Equis beer, and he says to you, who knows this? Stay thirsty, my friends. Now what is that telling you when you're buying their beer? That there's something, well buy more, but there's something in the beer that won't quench the thirst, so that's what they're trying to say, stay thirsty for the aliveness that this individual has, right? Be thirsty for life, quench your more banal thirst with Dos Equis, but be interesting.

Flamboyant. Most interesting rabbi in the world. You know, this staying thirsty and quenching a thirst, it's a theme, of course, that I alluded to in Buddhism, and my friend Sylvia Borstein and I, when we had our dialogue about Judaism and Buddhism, she went off on those who say Buddhism X, right, just like rabbis will say, oh, Judaism X, when you think that you can speak about Judaism with authority because it's so simple, without recognizing that it's rather complex.

There are many Judaisms, as Neusner pointed out. And Sylvia Borstein said, there are many Buddhisms, you can probably find everything you can possibly imagine under the Buddhist canopy, right, for belief. And one belief that many in the West have about Buddhism is that the first truth, the first noble truth of the Buddha was that desire leads to suffering.

And Dr. Mark Epstein, another Jew, another Jewish Buddhist, wrote a book called *Opening to Desire*, or *Open to Desire*, and in it he explores desire, and he writes passionately about it, and he writes that the reason he's writing the book is to dispel the common misunderstanding of, quote, Buddhism strives to eliminate all desire. He writes, the actual word that the Buddha used to describe the cause of suffering, or dukkha, is not desire, it was tanha, which means thirst, or craving. It connotes, he writes, what we might also call clinging, the attempt to hold on to something that is ungraspable, not the desire for happiness or completion, those are healthy desires, but the desire to hold on to what is essentially unhold-on-able, you know, made up of that word, you can't grasp it, you can't hold on to it.

And tanha, which means thirst, stay thirsty, my friends. He then goes on to tell a story about a Sufi that many of you might have heard of, Nazruddin, he's a kind of clown figure, kind of a wise man of Helm individual. Nazruddin, in the Sufi tradition, I think I've told this story in the shul, he's sitting in the center of a Middle Eastern marketplace, crying his eyes out, a platter of peppers are spilled out on the ground before him, and steadily, and methodically, he's reaching for pepper after pepper, and crying as he chews them deliberately, and he's wailing, and someone says to him, Nazruddin, what's wrong with you? Why are you eating these peppers? As the tears are flowing down from his face, he turns to them and he says, I'm looking for a sweet one.

You know, so the story, of course, is so brilliant, because it points out at once the problem with desire, which is that inevitably, as Freud, Buddha, of course, and Freud pointed out, we can't get satisfaction. It ultimately always leaves a remainder, that despite our desire and our imagining that we will finally get the sweet one, we never wake up. It perseveres, that suffering perseveres.

We are indefatigable in our pursuit of pleasure, and we never realize that we can't get it. But in that Sufi tradition, like in the Jewish tradition, there's something powerful about Nazruddin's story, which is also necessary to point out, which is that for Sufis, who are theists, and Jews, who also are theists, there is something about the yearning, the desire, which itself is holy. The desire itself, that there are some cravings that keep us alive.

A craving for God in the spiritual tradition of Sufism, a craving, a thirst for God in the Jewish tradition, is a way of entering into the infinity of desire, and hopefully not clinging as we recognize its infinitude. Softening. It's a piece of that Nazruddin story.

And of course, thirst is a very prominent feature of the fourth book of the Bible that we are about to enter into tomorrow morning, the book of Bamidbar, which literally means in the wilderness or in the desert. You can imagine an image that is as strong as the desert would make us think of thirst. And in fact, the Israelites in the desert are going to be looking for water at every turn.

In fact, in a moment, they're going to be looking for water. The Midrash says, why is the Midbar a place where Torah is given? So the famous answer is that it is to teach each and every one of us to be hefker like the Midbar. That each and every one of us should be unpossessed, the way the wilderness is unpossessed, then we can receive Torah.

Torah is given to those who are not possessed by something else. But much like that image, there's another image. The reason why the Torah is given in the desert is because the Torah is compared to water, says the Midrash.

Hoy kol tzamei l'chulamayim, let all who thirst come to water. And the Sfas Emes, the great Gera rebbe says, in order to receive Torah, the desert is employed as an image to tell you that if you don't know that you're missing something, if you don't know that you thirst for something, Torah doesn't have a place to land. That revelation, wisdom is predicated by a sense that something here isn't right.

I need something, I'm lacking something. The great story of the Zen teacher who's approached by a professor who wants him to teach him Zen and he's pouring him tea and tells the professor to tell him when to stop pouring. And the professor never says when and he keeps pouring and pouring and pouring and the tea is spilling everywhere.

And so finally the professor says, stop! And the Zen teacher said, well, let me tell you, if you want to learn Zen, you're going to have to empty out your cup because you're so full. There's nowhere for the Zen teachings, the Torah, the wisdom to land. So staying thirsty in our tradition is actually Tanha, it is, it's holy.

To be thirsty in our tradition is to be someone who is, as my friend Dr. Aaron Leif Smokler wrote, someone who is recognizing that they do not contain within themselves all that they need to survive. That they are dependent. They become aware of their essential human insufficiency.

To be connected with a fundamental lack is to be connected. With a desire that is not easily quenched by small things. There was a teacher named Nisargadatta.

He was a simple Indian teacher. He was famous for sitting on crowded streets. He would give out these little bidis or Indian cigarettes.

He once commented, the problem with desire is not desire. It's that our desires are too small. Our desires are too small, he said.

To be connected to the place of the desert where Torah is given tomorrow night, where Torah is given every moment, is to be connected to a yearning, a tzima'on, a thirst that no clinging can hold. It's infinite. But to open ourselves to that thirst is to release ourselves from the suffering and the marketing and the demands of every single one who says, this is what you need to be happy.

There's a story about a Kabbalist. Some of you know the story where a man was looking for wisdom and he thought Kabbalah has it. You know, everybody goes through different periods.

He had gone through almost every wisdom school and he tried them all and he said, OK, Kabbalah is for me and he made his way to Jerusalem. And he was standing in the room of a great Kabbalist and he was expecting the Kabbalist to give him some deep secret about life. And at some moment in his class, the Kabbalist reached out an apple to the stranger from America who was standing in the back.

And the stranger from America thought, oh, now I'm going to get a transmission, I'm going to get some deep wisdom. So he walked over to grab the apple and all of the students that were surrounding the Kabbalist all said, no, no, don't. And so he stood back, oh, I'm scared.

I'm scared to do it again. And it went like three or four times. It went back and forth.

The teacher would extend the apple and then the student would get scared. And so finally he looked around and all of those were saying, don't. And he looked at him and he was about to cry and they looked at him passionately and they said, this is the way you open to

wisdom. You don't cling. You don't grasp. You receive. Kabbalat Torah. It's a Kabbalah. It's receptive.

The great Buddhist scholar Stephen Bachel said, if you want to know the difference between Buddhist idea of desire and how you work that out with attachment and families, he called his wife into the room and he told his wife the question, how can I be attached to you and also be free of desire? And she took out a coin from her pocket. We'll take some now. She took like an object and she said, you can hold this like that or you can hold it like this.

You're holding it either way. This is stay thirsty, my friends. This is stay open. This is be empty. This is the kind of hunger, the kind of thirst that only a full night of learning can help us realize we have. Because that's really what it's all about.

You think about there are all kinds of reasons for learning all night on Shavuot because we fell asleep before we heard the Torah. It's a thousand years ago. It could be because coffee houses began to proliferate around the time of Tikkun in the 16th century and so we started staying up. But I think it's deeper. I think it's about stay thirsty, my friends, or stay cheesecakey, you know. You can't eat enough Torah because you could stay up all night and it won't matter. You got to hold it like that. You can keep pouring it in. It's infinite.

Stay thirsty. It's all night. It's all year. It's all your life. The great Rav Kook wrote, Esh kodesh hayokered bil levavi There is a holy fire that burns in my heart. Tshukati haboeret be'ei hefsek p'niyutai le'el chai I have a fire that burns without stop for the living God.

Tzama nafshi le'el chai I'm thirsty for you. Stay thirsty, my friends. Please rise.