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Big Questions, Little Questions
Mark Belletini

Opening Words

We are here
after a week of spring rains
to worship, to ask the kind of questions
for which our lives must provide the answers,
And so, we begin our time of thoughtful joy
by joining together in blessing our beginning:
Living our lives with purpose and gratitude,
moved by the beauty of the world
and claiming justice for all who live upon it,
we open our hearts to greater loving,
healthier knowledge, deeper compassion
and hope of peace.

Sequence

And if the spring wind asks me,
"Which way are you going?"
what will be my answer?
And if the tulips outside,
which are radiant today
but which droop by next week,
ask me, "And how will you mark our passing?"
what will be my answer?
And if the sun and clouds in their game
of hide and seek ask me,
"Why are you not joining us and playing too?"
what will be my answer?
And if I sit down in my chair up here,
and the silence comes to me, and asks me
"What is this world which stretches
out past these walls and windows

and goes on far, far past the horizon?
A gift? A puzzle? A home? A challenge?
A song? An elegant form of question?
What will be my answer?

silence

And if my own life questions me,
and asks about intimacies that bind to a hundred others…family and friends, loves and co-workers, brief but memorable conversations with strangers while traveling…how will I answer? I begin by naming those who help to name me by their love and care. I thank them
by naming them aloud, or in the quiet sanctuary
of my heart.

naming

And if art and music and community are themselves questions, what will be my answer?

Readings

The First Reading *is from the Book in the Tanakh, or the Bible, which Jews often call by the Hebrew Shemoth, and which is most often in common English called by its Greek name Exodus. These tales were woven together into final edited form somewhere around 500 BCE.*

They came to the wilderness of Zyn. There the whole community grumbled together against Moshe and against Aharon.

"It would have been better if the Eternal had just wiped us out back in Egypt. At least there we could have eaten some meat and bread
as we were perishing, but in this wilderness we will all actually die slowly of starvation."

The next morning, at dawn, there was seen upon the surface of the desert something fine, like frozen dew. When the people saw it, they cried out in their dialect *Man hu?* that is, "What is it?" For they really had no idea what it was.

Moshe said to them, "This is the bread which the Eternal has given you to eat. Gather enough of it for your needs. They did this, although, of course; some took more, and some less. But when they measured what they had gathered, it all turned out to be the same weight. They were told not to leave any leftovers overnight.
But some did of course, and they found the bread to be all full of maggots the next morning. However, on the sixth day they were to gather up twice as much as usual because it was not going to fall on the seventh day, the Sabbath. "On that one day, it will not rot," said the Eternal. The people called this bread from the sky…which was white, sweet like honey and shaped like a coriander seed, *Manna*, after their question, "What is it?

The Second Reading comes from Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg's magnificent study of thebook of Shemoth, The Particulars of Rapture, written just a few years ago.

At the heart of the Exodus, there is a drama of "questioning." For example, Pharaoh asks, "What have we done, releasing these slaves from our service?" The people attack Moses, crying, "What have you done to us?" Later, when they lack water, they cry, "What are we going to drink?" When the people grumble against Moses and Aaron because they are hungry, the prophets ask, "What kind of power do you think we have anyway?" The people continue to complain, "For what did you bring us out of Egypt?" I am suggesting that these simple "What?" questions are corrosive moral challenges. For questions do destabilize… they find difficulty and distance, where one might have dreamt of ease and continuity.

Sermon

For Jews around the world, today is the 22nd day in the month of Nisan, and thus, the eighth and final day of the Passover. Throughout this week, there have been special meals, called Seders, or ordered suppers, where the story of Moses and
the philosophy of liberation is explored in an elaborate ritual. The fact that the food associated with this holiday is so delicious only adds to this holiday's popularity among both Jews, but also among liberal Christians of various kinds, and certainly Unitarian Universalists. Some of our ancestors in Ukraine, in fact, were celebrating this feast over 400 years ago.

The ceremony of the ordered supper, or Seder, often brings people together regardless of belief. I know a few Jews who clearly consider themselves atheists, and yet who look forward to this feast. Indeed, since there is, and can be, no final, authenticated version of the Haggadah, or ritual program for the supper, variations and creative interpretations have blossomed throughout out recent history like flowers in the spring. You can find radical feminist seders, and seders which deliberately exile God, and seders that lift up the situation of the Palestinians as comparable to the situation of the Israelites in Egypt. You can find gay and lesbian seders, seders full of poetry written just last week, and vegetarian and even vegan seders, where all of the traditional Northern European meaty foods, thick with eggs and chicken fat, have given way to baked eggplant with mint.

Yet in every haggadah I have seen, there are some constants. You always celebrate the spring (which must be confusing for Jews in Melbourne Australia and Capetown South Africa). You always break the unleavened bread and declaim solidarity with all who suffer oppression. You always drink four cups of wine or juice in joyous celebration. And a child, or at least the youngest person available, always asks questions.

The questions are not the typical questions which have marked the history of religion and philosophy both in the West and in the East.

The questions are not:
"Do we live after we die?"
or

"What is the nature of God?"
or
"What proofs can you offer that God exists or does not exist?"
or
"What is the meaning of life, the meaning of death or the meaning and manner of creation?"
These are big questions. Big, big questions.

When the child at the seder says, "This night is different from all other nights…why?" it's a very small question. It's simple and direct. No Meaning, capital M there, or mysteries of God. It's certainly not a question you'll find discussed in the terribly deep writings of great theologians and philosophers like Immanuel Kant, Thomas Aquinas, Baruch Spinoza, Mary Daly or Shankara.

But I'd like to suggest this morning that often the big questions miss the point, whereas the small questions are right on the mark. I'd also like to suggest that it's only the small questions which have the power, in Aviva Gottlieb Zornberg's words, to really challenge us. "For questions do destabilize," she says; "They find difficulty and distance, where one might have dreamt of ease and continuity."

Why is this night different from all other nights" does just that. Can you imagine the effect if a child were to come in here and ask, "Why, on Sunday, do you all sit together this way, listening to someone talk and some other people play music up at the North end of the room? You don't do that on Tuesday or Wednesday? Why today? And what are you doing?"

That sounds "destabilizing" to me. The child would be noticing a difference in his or her parents' behavior from Saturday to Sunday, and just be pointing it out. There are answers, certainly, as to why we do things on Sunday morning, and why preaching exists, or music. But I, for one, take them for granted, and every once and a while I would appreciate a child asking me such a deep, if very simple, question.

The story of the manna in the wilderness, associated with the Seder story, is also "a simple question" sort of story. The people are out in the middle of

nowhere. They are far from the comforts of the land they just left, the thrashing silver fish in the Nile River, their homes built of the strong local stone, the Kroger down the street. Sure they were slaves and all, but, Look, they said, "this free desert living is not all it's cracked up to be. The food is scarce, the water flows underground where we can't see it, the sun is hot. We're hungry and thirsty and kinda wish we were still slaves to the system back in the old country."

In the story, God hears their cry, and the next morning there is this white stuff all over the ground "like frozen dew" which is sweet to eat. They are told that it is their God-given bread and to stop complaining.

"What is this stuff?" they ask, in their dialect. "Man hu?" And thus the word Manna, which even people who have never cracked the cover of the Bible have heard of, because it has become an English phrase "manna from heaven."

Such a simple question. Nothing grand. "What is this stuff?"

Some of the scholars who read this text come from a rather rationalist point of view. They are well aware that if you go into some Middle Eastern markets you can buy jars of this supposed miracle food to this very day…because it is quite simply not a miracle. There is a certain kind of tamarisk tree that grows in the Sinai area, which, when its bark is punctured by the snouts of certain insects, exudes a white froth which solidifies in the air into a kind of small white wafer of sweetness. This is the manna the ancients ate, say the scholars. They eat the same thing in Sicily, where the white froth comes down from the branches of a certain tree like icicles, sweet and delicious. Even what happens every spring in Vermont, where the exuded tree sap from maples is boiled down into a syrup, is a parallel version to what happened in ancient times in that miserable desert.

Well, that's one way of looking at the story. But the history of Jewish philosophy is very different from the received traditions of two thousand years of Christian philosophy, whether Catholic, Protestant, Anabaptist, or Orthodox.

After all, the present pope once authored a text saying that either you're a Catholic or you are simply wrong. And Dr. Falwell has said as much for the evangelical side…either you believe as he does, or you are simply wrong…and damned.
The West has been in the thrall of this kind of rigid either/or thinking for 18 hundred years. Even atheists, who supposedly reject this tradition, speak as if the question as to whether God is, or is not, is a meaningful and interesting question. Tick tock, tick tock. Either you are in or you are out. You have to choose sides. Even politically. Either you agree with smirking pundit and Time magazine cover-girl Ann Coulter that liberals are all completely looney, or you are not even worth throwing water on, if you were on fire.

The Jewish rabbis come to town with a refreshing antidote to the curse of either/or thinking. You can think something completely different from the rabbi across the hall from you and still be a Jew. You can even reject God and still be a Jew, or question every political move Israel has ever made, especially in regard to some of the Palestinians, and still be a Jew.

You see, the question, "What is this stuff?" asked of the manna, is also found in a context. So after deciding that miracles don't happen, and that there is perfectly good explanation as to why white sweet wafers are found all over the ground come morning, you can notice that the people are requested not to hoard the wafers. They are only to pick up what they need. No more. If they try any shenanigans, it doesn't work.

In short, the answer to the question "What is this stuff?" Another answer: "This stuff is the makings of an alternative economy." In the words of Ched Myers, a scholar whose insight often leaves me dazzled, "The manna is a symbol reminding (the people) "that the purpose of economic organization is to guarantee enough for everyone, so that material sustenance circulates rather than concentrates."

I love that phrase. It says so much. "Circulates rather than concentrates." He continues, "The old tale of the manna in the wilderness expresses an ancient memory of what it means to be human." The notion of the Sabbath which first appears here in the Bible sought to reconstruct the people's consciousness of dependence on the land which had been shattered by their

experience in captivity. Imperial Egypt exploited nature and controlled all the forces of production. In contrast, the Sabbath for "the liberated community" is meant to interrupt this process by prescribing a weekly rest for both the land and human labor. And, at least for one day a week, the Sabbath privileges the communal discipline of "being over doing." Let me say that again "being over doing."

I also notice that the manna cannot be accumulated or stored up…it always rots when you try to do that. I suppose the English proverb that repeats this idea is, "You can't take it with you."

So, for at least some Jewish readers, the answer to the question, "What is this stuff?" is not "It's sap from a tamarisk tree," but rather, "It's about a just economic system, and how we relate both to each other and to the natural world." It's a simple question that, in Zornberg's words, finds "difficulty and distance" where we might have been dreaming of "ease and continuity." "What is this stuff?" is also pointing out the pain of the present world situation, especially here in the States, where there is no continuity any more between the rich and the poor; indeed, the distance between them grows every day…and this presents more and more moral difficulties for us all.

Still another Jewish reader would notice that the manna is simply gathered. There is no farming, no planting. It is simply found. This is the story of 99% of human history, according to anthropologist Paul Shepherd. "What is this stuff?" in this case refers to the realization that we are not in control of the universe or even of our lives. Life is a gift that we never even asked for…we just arrived and here it was. The universe stretching out to its mysterious edge,
the thin and warm skin on this small planet earth that is distinct from the rest of the cosmos which is so cold and dark…all of this is "stuff" we just found. We don't make it, control it, or finally, in the end, survive it. So another rabbi might look at the question "What is this stuff?" and say "It's an incredible mystery, and I suggest we live our lives within the embrace of that gift…that we ourselves learn to be givers like the universe, bringing a vision of justice and warmth into the midst of a cold and barren cosmic wilderness. We, like the manna, just arrived on this scene. As we are nourished by what is given to us, so may we nourish the world around us with our visions of

peace and moral practices of truth-telling, loving kindness, self-examination, and
questioning."

And of course the manna story can mean many other things as well. And not one of them is the final and true meaning, for all people, at all times. That kind of thinking is antithetical to the Jewish practice of recording the diverse answers given by the rabbis to every question. All of their answers were Jewish answers. The one who sees the world in a rational way, the one who dreams of a just economy, and the one who is grateful and blessed to be alive.

Sometimes, in Unitarian Universalist circles, I have heard statements of exclusivity that might benefit from a little exposure to the Jewish norm. You know, sentences with the dread grammatical structure, "She doesn't strike me as very Unitarian, that's for sure." Oh yes, we have a history that we share, but that history is complex and rich as butter. So while it's perfectly ok for someone to be Unitarian Universalist and see the world through the eyes of justice and economic equity, it's also perfectly OK for someone to focus more on meditation, symbols, and prayer, and it is also a well-rooted tradition in our history to focus on church as carefully cultivated and beloved community. And there are many other ways to be Unitarian Universalist as well, ways that are thoroughly rooted in our living heritage.

And it's also perfectly fine for any one of us to say that all three of these things are important at the same time. Many Jews, historically, have done this very well.

In any case, in the world of religious and philosophical thinking, I am holding at bay all of the large questions, which so often end up stubbornly, and often foolishly, digging in with their either/or answers. And I am holding up the small questions this morning. "Does the sea go on forever, grandpa?" as in the children's story this morning. "Why is this night so different from all other nights?" as in the typical seder. Or even, whether asked of a sweet white wafer under an ancient tamarisk tree, or a time of morning worship in a Unitarian Universalist congregation, "What is this stuff?"

Offertory

The offering is an ancient and simple sign that we are not indifferent to each other, that we take responsibility seriously, and that since our lives began in a generosity we can only receive, we give thanks by a ceremony of giving that is also strangely enough, a receiving. What could be more remarkable than that?

Prayer by Mexican Poet Alberto Blanco

Si hay tiempo
es este
Si hay esperanza
es esta
Si hay espacio
es este
Si hay respuesta
es esta
Si hay otro mundo
es este
Esta es la otra vida

If there is time, it is this time.
If there is hope, it is this hope.
If there is space, it is this space.
If there is an answer, it is this answer.
If there is another world, it is this world.
This is the other life.