

Welcome to Beyond Twelve Gates

"Send the police! There's no pickle on my hamburger!" In April a man from Springfield, MO., called 911 to complain about a sandwich he purchased at a chain restaurant. Bizarrely, he wasn't the first to call 911 to report a disappointing run-in with a hoagie. In 2012, a Connecticut man called 911 to complain about a sandwich. The dispatcher's sage advice: "Don't buy the sandwich." A Florida woman called her local 911 service six times one morning in mid-October to thank the sheriff for giving her his bologna sandwich. The woman was charged with six felony counts of misusing 911, and accused of being , , , full of baloney.

Common sense dictates that the police have more important things to do than deal with a bad burger. These days, however, common sense isn't very common. Where can we find wisdom and understanding? Follow the advice of King David, who said (Psalm 19): "The Torah of G-d is perfect, restoring the soul. The testimony of God is faithful, making the simpletons wise."

Parshas Devarim Deuteronomy 1:1 - 3:11

This week we begin the fifth and final book of the Torah, Deuteronomy. This book is also called Mishna Torah, "Repetition of the Torah" - thus the Greek title 'Deuteronomy.' Its contents were spoken by Moses to the Jewish people during the final five weeks of his life as the people prepared to cross the Jordan River into the land of Israel. A central theme of Deuteronomy is Moses' review of the mitzvos, and his emphasis on the change of lifestyle the Jewish people were to undergo. The transition was to be made from a supernatural existence in the desert to a natural life to be experienced in the Land of Israel. The portion begins with Moses' veiled rebuke in which he makes reference to the many sins and rebellions of the past forty years. Moses spends significant time discussing the failed mission of the spies; ten of the twelve men sent to scout out the land returned with a bad report, resulting in the entire nation wandering in the desert for forty years. Moses later discusses the Children of Israel's conquest on the eastern bank of the Jordan River. This Torah portion concludes with words of encouragement for Moses' successor, Joshua.

Rabbinic Ruminations

We all know the story of Superman. When the Man of Steel was an infant, he escaped Krypton's red sun in a rocket lovingly prepared for him by his parents. First known as Kal-El, our hero arrived under our yellow sun in Smallville to eventually become Clark Kent. Since his debut in 1938, kids big and small have been captivated by Superman's super abilities such as super-strength ("...more powerful than a locomotive ..."). The explanation for Superman's powers is that because he was from a red sun planet (Krypton), somehow the yellow sun of the Earth unleashed some inner super power mechanism that gave Superman all his ...super-ness. Escapist fun? Sure. But is there anything in the real world that suggests something inside the human body could be unleashed -- like removing the shackles from Hercules -- and allow for dramatically increased strength?

Our bodies contain a protein with the superhero-sounding name of myostatin. It basically works to keep the size and number of your muscle cells -- and thus your overall strength -- within a certain range. Since myostatin negatively regulates muscle cell growth, its removal allows muscle cells to get larger and increase in number. Cattle that have a myostatin gene deletion look unusually and excessively muscular. In 2004, a child identified with this gene mutation was seen to have developed normally but with greatly enhanced strength. At the age of 4 this child could hold two 6.5 lb. dumbbells with arms straight out to the sides. In 2009 research scientists inserted the human gene for follistatin (which works to block the action of myostatin) into knee muscles of macaque monkeys. You'll get a kick (pun intended) out of the results: The monkey knee muscles grew about 25% larger and stronger than normal. Using comic book reasoning and logic, perhaps the radiation from our yellow sun activated some biological mechanism that eventually led to increased follistatin in all the muscles in Clark Kent's body. Voila. Super-strength.

Strength can take many forms. Proverbs 16:32 says, "He who is slow to anger is better than a strong

man, and master of his passions is better than a conqueror of a city." Anger can be expressed in many ways; a heated argument, blowing a fuse, or simply fuming with aggravation. In the words of Will Rogers, "People who fly into a rage always make a bad landing." You, too, can acquire the strength of Superman. "Who is strong? He who conquers his evil inclination." (Ethics of the Fathers 4:1)

Quote of the Week

In 1938, J.R.R. Tolkien was preparing to release *The Hobbit* in Germany. The publishers first wanted to know if he was of Aryan descent. This was his response:

If I am to understand that you are enquiring whether I am of Jewish origin, I can only reply that I regret that I appear to have no ancestors of that gifted people.

Joke of the Week

Monday night (July 15) begins *Tisha B'Av*, the Jewish National Day of Mourning. *Tisha B'Av* is a full 24 hour fast, similar in that respect to *Yom Kippur*. *Tisha B'Av* is the saddest day on the Jewish calendar, commemorating the multiple tragedies that occurred to the Jewish people throughout our long history. Remarkably, the destruction of the first and second Holy Temples took place on *Tisha B'Av* itself. *Tisha B'Av* is preceded by the sad and introspective period known as 'The 9 Days'. During these days we minimize joy and laughter to better focus on the meaning of this period of time. I have a great Joke of the Week to share with you . . . but in deference to the solemnity of the 9 Days and *Tisha B'Av*, I'll save it for next week.