Fear of Change

In this week’s Torah portion, Behaalotecha, we read an unexpected and disturbing passage:

The people were looking [for excuses] to complain, and it was evil in the ears of the Lord... They... once again began to cry, and they said, "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now... we have nothing but manna..." The Lord became very angry, and Moses considered it evil. Moses said to the Lord, "Why have You treated [me] so badly? Why [did] You place the burden of this entire people upon me? Did I conceive this entire people? Did I give birth to them...? Where can I get meat to give to all these people? For they are crying on me, saying, 'Give us meat to eat.' I cannot carry this entire people alone, for it is too hard for me. If this is the way You treat me, please kill me...

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Assemble for Me seventy men... [who] will bear the burden of the people with you... Say to the people, "Prepare yourselves for tomorrow and you shall eat meat, because you have cried in the ears of the Lord saying, "Who will feed us meat, for we had it better in Egypt." [Therefore,] the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat. You shall eat it not one day, not two days, not five days, not ten days, not twenty days, but for a full month, until it comes out of your nose and nauseates you. Because you have despised the Lord... saying, "Why did we ever leave Egypt?"

Moses said, "600,000 people on foot... and You say, "I will give them meat... for a full month"? If [all the] sheep and cattle were slaughtered... would it be enough? If all the fish of the sea were gathered... would it be enough? Then the Lord said to Moses, "Is My power limited? Now you will see if My word comes true... or not!" [Numbers 11:1-23]

All this is profoundly puzzling. How can this be? Why do the Jews “look for excuses to complain”? Why are they being so childish? Why do they want meat so badly? How can they turn away from God so cavalierly after all the miracles they witnessed? How can they fondly remember the food they ate in Egypt, but seem to forget the pain of slavery? How can they wish to go back to toiling under the whip until they collapse? Why go back to Pharaoh? Isn't it clear God is stronger than him? Note that they are not starving: The manna keeps them alive. If they think it’s too bland, is taste so important in their situation? Also, isn’t Moses being overly dramatic by
asking God to kill him? Doesn’t God’s reaction also seem a bit out of proportion?

This may have been the straw that broke the camel’s back. The Israelites complained nonstop in earlier portions. In Exodus 14, they say to Moses, with heavy sarcasm:

Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to die in the desert? What is this that you have done, to us to take us out of Egypt? [We told you,] in Egypt, “Leave us alone, and we will serve the Egyptians, because we would rather serve the Egyptians than die in the desert.” [Exodus 14:11-12]

In Exodus 16, the Jews say to Moses and Aaron:

If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by fleshpots, when we ate bread to our fill! For you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire congregation to death. [Exodus 16:3]

In Exodus 17, the Jews again say to Moses:

Why have you brought us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst? [Exodus 17:3]

The Midrash even says, if you can believe it, that, after God split the sea and let the Israelites cross on dry land, they complained that the land was not dry enough, and their shoes were getting muddy! [Exodus Rabbah 24:1]

Now, the central question: Were the Israelites truly complaining about what they said they were complaining about? Or were they just using these complaints as rationalizations to mask a deeper dissatisfaction? There was a deeper dissatisfaction. How do we know that? From the opening sentence of our passage:

Vayehi ha’am kemit-onenim.

The people were looking [for excuses] to complain. [Numbers 11:1]

What is the common thread in all these complaints? Fear of change. They prefer the devil-they-know, slavery, to the devil-they-don’t-know, the uncertainty of the desert and a new way of life. Change is always hard, especially for older people, and leaders tend to be older. Yes, life in Egypt was supremely painful, but Egypt was also home; it was also familiar. In Egypt, they worked hard as slaves for people who beat them and despised them, but they had life, food, shelter, clothing, protection, regularity, predictability. They were not restricted in their behavior by 613 commandments. In fact, the Midrash [Mechilta, Tanchuma, Beshallach 1] tells us that only twenty percent of the Israelites followed Moses in the Exodus to the Promised Land. The remaining eighty percent had gotten used to their lot in Egypt, assimilated and perished.
In the Land of Israel, the Jews would have been an easy target for its many strong neighbors. In Egypt, a superpower protected them, albeit to exploit them, and allowed them to build up their numbers in safety. Slavery minimized intermarriage and contact with the outside world, which would have led to idolatry.

Fast forward to the present. I was born and raised in that same Egypt, and lived there until I was eighteen. I saw the Jewish community shrink around me from 100,000 to 1,000, and I was one of the last Jews to be forced out, in late 1967. In retrospect, it was all to the good: The Jews from Egypt did better outside of Egypt than they could ever have done in Egypt, even under the best of conditions. But the uprooting was still excruciatingly painful to the heads of families, who continued, to their dying day, to wax nostalgic about their life in Egypt. They were harassed, persecuted, dispossessed, and finally forced out, but they glossed over all that and frequently said, “Well, at least they didn’t kill us!” As if not being quite as bad as the Nazis was a virtue that exonerated the Egyptians!

All this is known as the slave mentality. That’s why God engineered the forty-year trek through the desert. He wanted all those who were adult at the time of the Exodus to die out, so that a new generation, one that has not known slavery and truly wanted to live in freedom, would take over and start the new country in the Promised Land, with no regrets about life in Egypt.

Consider the following five events in Jewish history:

- One: In 164 BCE, the Jews were wondering whether to rise against the Greeks. That’s the story of Hanukkah.
- Two: In 70 CE, the Jews were wondering whether to rise against the Romans. That’s the story of the fall of the Second Temple.
- Three: In 135 CE, the Jews were wondering whether to rise against the Romans again. That’s the beginning of the Diaspora.
- Four: In the early 1930s, the Jews of Europe were wondering whether to try to leave when Naziism was slowly on the rise.
- Five: In the 1980s, the Lubavitch Hassidim were wondering whether to leave New York in light of serious problems with the Black community.

What do all these events have in common? Simply this: In all cases, the leaders advised against change. They always do. They are old, set in their
ways, they don’t want to lose control, and they are supremely confident in their ability to deal peacefully with the devil they know. Sometimes they are right, and sometimes they are wrong. Here is what happened:

- The rabbis counseled against fighting Greek oppression. They were wrong. We won.
- The rabbis counseled against fighting Roman oppression. They were right. We lost big. We lost both the Temple and the land.
- The rabbis counseled against leaving Europe. They said Hitler was just so much noise and would blow away. They said that Jews should especially avoid going to America, where they will assimilate; or to the Holy Land, where they will be ensnared by godless secular Zionists. They were wrong, big time. Night descended on the Jews of Europe, and most perished in the Holocaust.
- The Lubavitcher Rebbe told his people: Stay where you are! Calm will return and all problems with the Black community will be worked out. He was right. And Chabad is still based in New York.

There is no magic formula to determine when change is good, but for elderly leaders, it is always bad. All this is human. People dread change. It often takes a major crisis for people to embrace radical change willingly. Fear of change makes us continue to work in jobs we hate, stay in bad relationships, or even continue to use outdated and inferior equipment.

In the 11th-century, Solomon ibn Gabirol, the author of *Adon Olam*, wrote:

> At the head of all understanding is realizing what is and what cannot be, and consoling ourselves for what is not in our power to change. [Mibchar ha-Peninim (Choice of Pearls), Chapter 17 (Consciousness), verse 2]

In the 20th century, this insight was popularized by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, in his "Serenity Prayer":

> God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, 
The courage to change the things I can change, 
And the wisdom to know the difference.

I would like to modify it slightly, in light of today’s Torah portion:

> God, grant me the understanding to reject bad change, 
The courage to accept good change, 
And the wisdom to know the difference.

Shabbat shalom.