

# Cravings; Parshat Beha'alotecha

Source Sheet by Rabbi Amy Bernstein

## Rashi on Numbers 11:5:1

אשר נאכל במצרים חנם [we remember the fish which we did eat in Egypt for free]— If you say that they meant that the Egyptians gave them fish for nothing (without payment), then I ask, “But does it not state, (Exodus 5:18): [Go, therefore, now, and work], for there shall no straw be given you”? Now, if they did not give them straw for nothing, would they have given them fish for nothing! — **What then is the force of the word חנם? It means: free from (i.e. without us having been burdened with) heavenly commands (Midrash Sifrei Bamidbar 87).**

רש"י על במדבר י"א:ה'א'

אשר נאכל במצרים חנם. א"ת שִׁמְצָרִים נִתְּנִים לָהֶם דָּגִים חֲנָם, וְהֵלֹא כָּבֹד נֶאֱמַר "וְיָתֵן לָכֶם" (שמות ה'), אִם תִּבְּנוּ לֹא הָיוּ נִתְּנִין לָהֶם חֲנָם, דָּגִים הָיוּ נִתְּנִין לָהֶם חֲנָם? וּמָה הָיוּ אוֹמְרִים חֲנָם, חֲנָם מִן הַמִּצְוֹת (ספרי):

## Etz Chayim Commentary, page 828:

Why did the people complain about the manna, when the Torah makes a point of telling us how delicious it was? To feel prosperous, it is not enough for a person to have everything that is needed. One must have more than one's neighbors have. The manna was psychologically unsatisfying because everyone had it in abundance (Eybeschuetz).

## Eitz Chayim Commentary, page 828:

This shows the greatness of Moses as a leader. In one interpretation, the people wept and complained in the privacy of their homes, yet Moses sensed their unhappiness and understood its cause. Maimonides claims that the phrases "the Lord was very angry" occurs only as a divine response to instances of idolatry. This grumbling is perceived not as a comment about the food but as a rebellion against G-d's providence.

Rabbi Alex Israel - Pardes

I think that it is precisely because we are now a year later that the second incident is seen as so serious. A year earlier, the Israelites were a slave nation fresh out of Egypt. They were used to being fed by their masters. They found it difficult to fend for themselves. Their plea for food was justified. But now, a year later, after the revelation of Sinai, after

the miracles, after the Tabernacle, the people are very different. They have matured and grown. They now have national leaders and systems of government: princes of tribes, judges, and other systems of government. They have formed themselves into a nation with a religious-spiritual ideology. They should have more patience. They should have a more sophisticated way of coping with a problem of this sort.

Furthermore, the cries for food in Exodus were justified. A month out of Egypt, their food provisions fully spent, the people simply had no food. They were fully justified in their complaint. But here, a year later, they DO have food. They have the Manna. The verses deliberately stress this. The verse tells us how the Manna was a wonderful food that could be "baked" or "boiled". It tasted like "rich cream." Do the Israelites have a right to complain so bitterly, to weep and cry for meat? Are these the correct priorities? Is there truly no food, or is there a different problem? Could it be that the problem is not the Manna, but rather that "our souls are dried out" as the verse indicates? Is the problem in their stomachs or their souls?

Dr. Avivah Zornberg - BEWILDERMENTS p.74

### CONTINUAL DESIRE

In a similar vein, Ha'amek Davar reads the people's outbreak of desire. He reads the expression *hit-avu ta'avah*, "They were consumed with desire" - "they desired and resented their desire." For instance, they complain about the manna that falls every day - precisely because they receive only one day's ration at a time, which forces them into a position of continual desire. Ramban already expresses the idea. "They said, Even the manna that we live on is not truly in our hands, so that we may have the pleasure of seeing it available to us. Instead, we yearn for it and lift up our eyes to God to pray for it, that it may appear again today" (Num. 11:6).

The manna becomes an object of desire and a reminder of their vulnerability. They resent their dependency, the posture of prayer, the sense of not-to-have, which, as the poet Wallace Stevens has it, is the beginning of desire.

But, Ha'amek Davar adds, they are also embarrassed by their own repudiation of desire and of prayer. For that reason, they adopt a cover story - lust for meat, as though constant sensual gratification will secure them against the agitation of yearning.

"Ein kol! -- There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" (Num. 11:6).

Their own gaze turned heavenward makes them profoundly uneasy. "There is nothing," they cry. Or - more literally - "There is not everything!" The only thing that could allay their anxiety would be kol-everything, a plenitude of gratification that leaves no gaps of frustration.

In this complex reading, Ha'amek Davar explores some of the subtleties of desire. The manna, which is in general celebrated precisely for its plenitude (enough for each person) and for its regularity (it falls every day), is at the same time a figure for continual suspense: will it fall again tomorrow? It is the very opposite of the gratification called *pat*

*be-sallo*: lit., bread in the basket-the confidence that one has all one needs for the future. The manna is a constant reminder that desire can never be finally appeased, so that the object of desire carries with it intimations of dependency, possible frustration, endless yearning - and resentment. The other face of the gift of manna is the prohibition against hoarding. Like the gift of love, desire must be encountered anew each day.

#### Rashi on Numbers 11:4:3

WHO SHALL GIVE US FLESH TO EAT? — But did they not have flesh? Has it not been already stated, (Exodus 12:38) “and a mixed multitude went up with them and flocks and herds, [even very much cattle]”? If you say, “They had already eaten them”, then I reply, “But is it not stated at a later period, when they were about to enter the Land, (Numbers 32:1), “Now the children of Reuben had cattle in a very great multitude”? But the truth is that they were only seeking a pretext (Sifrei Bamidbar 86).

רש"י על במדבר י"א:ד'ג'  
מי יאכלנו בשר. וכי לא היה להם  
בשר? והלא כבר נאמר "וגם ערב רב  
עלה אתם וצאן ובקר" וגו' (שמות י"ב),  
וא"ת אכלום, והלא בכניסתן לארץ  
נאמר "ומקנה רב היה לבני ראובן" וגו'  
(במדבר ל"ב)? אלא שמבקשים עלילה  
(ספרי):

#### Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l: Covenant & Conversations: Bamidbar; The Adaptive Challenge (p. 121-125).

"A technical challenge is one where you have a problem and someone has the solution...Adaptive challenges are different. They arise when *we* are part of the problem.... Adaptive leadership is called for when the world is changing, when circumstances are no longer what they were, and when what once worked works no more. There is no quick fix, no pill, no simple following of instructions. We have to change. The leader cannot do it for us....

Moses with the insight of the greatest prophets intuitively saw all this. Hence his despair and wish to die. It is far easier to be a technical leader than an adaptive one. It is easy to leave it to G-d, hard to realize that G-d is calling us to responsibility, to become His partners in the work of Redemption.

Of course, the Torah does not leave it there. In Judaism, despair never has the last word. G-d comforts Moses, tells him to recruit seventy elders to share the burden of leadership with him, and gives him the strength to carry on. Adaptive leadership is, for Judaism, the highest form of leadership. That is what the prophets did. Without relieving people of their responsibilities, they gave them a vision and a hope. They spoke difficult, challenging truths, and they did so with a passion that still has the power to inspire the better angels of our nature.