

This Week in Torah B'ha'alotecha II

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6/11/20

O, those Israelites and those *asafsufim* who went with them!

Standing in the Sinai, there is a rumbling in the stomach that is being heightened by a rumbling among the people. There is talk of turning back toward Egypt. There are those who miss the meat and fish and the melons and the leeks and the garlic and.... They had enough of *manna* and forgetting the burden and atrocity of slavery, their taste buds want to go back. The experiences of Egypt were being rewritten by those combined rumblings. The Israelites stomachs and taste buds were yearning but there were those who fostered the anxieties.

Call them agitators or inciters. In this week's Torah portion, they have a group distinction. They are the *asafsufim*, the gatherers. It is a bit of an oxymoron because these individuals conveyed an individual detachment to the rest of the Israelites. Some translators used the term "riffraff," giving them a degrading characteristic. Some used the term "mixed multitude" to indicate that they were outsiders of sorts who were not bound to the *brit* as the rest of the Israelites were. This term does not have the normal Hebrew root—it is 4 letters instead of 3, indicating that they were foreign to the Hebrews. Some commentators believed that they were "hanger-on's" who were looking for an opportunity to escape Egypt and attached themselves to the Exodus.

RaSHI defined the murmurings as an opportunity to foster discontent; something he believed they wanted to do since leaving Egypt. They picked on the Israelite's vulnerability as they struggled with emotional security; that was manifested in food security—did they have enough food to eat. That made them prone to those who wished to foster discontent. Sforno added this by indicating that the real challenge was not found in food security, but trust in God. This, he believed, was a challenge to Divine Providence. Jewish philosopher Philo described this as a chance for individual authority to flex its muscle against Theistic omnipotence—the individual vs. God.

The focus on food in this *sedra* easily draws comparison to the Greek epicurean philosophy, which taught that pleasure was the chief good in life. Epicurious wrote around 300 BCE: "When we say that pleasure is the end and aim, we do not mean the pleasures of the prodigal or the pleasures of sensuality, as we are understood to do by some through ignorance, prejudice or willful misrepresentation. By pleasure we mean the absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. It is not an unbroken succession of drinking bouts and of revelry, not sexual lust, not the enjoyment of the delicacies of a luxurious table, which produce a pleasant life.... We cannot live pleasantly without living wisely, honorably, and justly, nor live wisely, honorably, and justly without living pleasantly." The Israelites saw that the food they did not have access to be really the key way to enjoy life—satisfied in their stomachs, satisfied in their lives. Ibn Ezra refuted this belief. He admitted that the Israelites had a pattern of *kvetching* ever since they left Egypt. He wrote of the need for Divine presence and that faith

could satisfy the soul because the body was just a vessel of God. Law and study could help transcend a person's desire for food.

There are other Biblical commentators who saw the lusting for food as a metaphor for something else. *Kli Yakar* of 19th century Eastern Europe saw this as a call for sexual promiscuity. Turning back from God's laws and the sense of God providing, this was a quest for primal debauchery – something that would occur in the ceremony dedicating the Golden Calf. Again, the desires of the body would take precedence over the matters of the heart and soul; thus this was a rebellion. Rabbi Jacob Isaac Shapira saw it as a greed that could not be satisfied; it was monetary in nature as the *asafsufim* were going to broker the food to the Israelites and make a profit. Here we see that greed and lustfulness were rooted in the same experience—a desire to take care of the body over the ethereal realm.

This portion does not describe a craving to get some good “eats!” O no, it was far more rebellious than that—it was a battle of authority: the body vs. soul, the self vs. the Divine; Egyptian servitude vs. being true servants of God. Though God's authority prevailed--- this was only the start of a series of rebellious actions that dominated the next 4 *sedrot*.