

## **Chukat-Balak, 5780 - Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener**

George Bernard Shaw once quipped that "we learn from experience that men learn nothing from experience." Our tradition confirms this. After a long litany of complaints followed by devastating consequences, the Israelites again succumb to petulance and ingratitude, lamenting the inadequacy of the heavenly Manna. Any student of the Talmud cannot help but marvel at the Jews' complaint. After all, the Talmud (Yoma 75) famously teaches that the Manna could adopt the taste of almost any food. According to one opinion, it not only tasted like almost any food, but could literally transform into the desired food. With this incredible gift, what were they missing?

Perhaps on the most basic level, the question is itself the answer. The very fact that the Israelites lacked nothing was precisely what made them feel like they had nothing. Entitlement, the great internal villain of the Jew, robs a person of all satisfaction in life, and renders that which would otherwise be gratifying and exhilarating commonplace and insufficient. Indeed, it is not coincidental that the Israelites were attacked by "נהשים השרפים," fiery serpents, which hearken back to the serpent of the Garden of Eden (see Rashi Bamidbar 21:6). Just as Adam and Chava had almost everything given to them, they ultimately could not be happy and needed the one fruit that was off limits. When one feels unsatisfied with one's specific lot, this feeling literally burns within a person like the serpents' venom, robbing him or her of any joy that would otherwise exist.

Broadly speaking, it seems that our people's collective sense of entitlement has increased over the years. Many of the survivors who emigrated to this country possessed an incredible work ethic, working 18 hour days, 6 days a week, for pennies. While this lifestyle took its toll, many of them did not complain, as they were driven by the constant gratitude of simply having a roof over their head, basic food, and the ability to support a family in safety. They were grateful for the rare days off that they received, and didn't have time to consider the imperfections in their personal lives. A survivor once recounted how immediately after the war, anytime two Jews saw each other on the street -- regardless of whether they knew each other personally or not -- they would eagerly embrace. I'm alive! You're alive! Nothing was taken for granted. I similarly remember hearing a wealthy Israeli describe the simple living during the early days of the State: "We had so little back then, but we were so happy."

While the Modern Orthodox community has a great deal to be proud of, I fear that we do not regularly address the need to consciously combat a sense of entitlement. The more that we come to expect lavish weekly Kiddushim,

overpriced vacations, and unending stimulation, the more we fall into this venomous trap. Rather than feeling content with what we have, we become ruled by the tyranny of the should's, expectations of how things should be as opposed to gratitude for how things are. And the effects are far reaching. These perspectives can infect our holiness, our relationships, and even our health. This trap is especially dangerous for children, and there is likely great wisdom in teaching temperance and restraint from a young age.

Avoiding an attitude of entitlement often has less to do with the objective level of luxury that a person enjoys, and more to do with the degree of consciousness with which one enjoys it. Mindless consumption of luxury breeds entitlement, while consistent practices of gratitude and contemplation vanquish it. This is indeed the lesson of the Manna from our Parasha. Although at first blush, the Manna seems to bear no relevance to our current post-Wilderness lives, the Torah repeatedly places great emphasis on it to sensitize our lenses to a critical spiritual reality, namely, that the Manna *does* continue to fall each and every day. Rather than seeing one's possessions as "mine," a holy person awakens each morning to a daily sense of renewal, recognizing that just because an apartment, a car, or a sum of money belonged to me yesterday does not perforce mean that I am entitled to have it today. The daily re-gifted possessions and blessings of such holy people are experienced as no less miraculous than the Manna falling each morning. Shabbat, the day when we cease from constructive effort and accomplishment, is the most opportune time to experience this truth, and it is for this reason we eat two Challah loaves which represent the Manna. In biting into the Challah, we are reminded that despite the illusion of our own accomplishments during the week, every pleasure we enjoy is ultimately a gift from Heaven. Indeed, the very same Manna can become a source of entitlement and complaints, or a source of deep gratitude, depending on our mindset.

As we encounter July 4th during a year in which many of our simple pleasures and luxuries have been limited or taken away, the lesson of the Manna rings as true as ever. Perhaps we ourselves are guilty of complacency and entitlement to the miraculous existence of a country that protects our liberties and affords us protection to serve Hashem. Indeed, a quick review of world history readily reminds us just how truly special this is. We must never cease to thank Hashem -- in speech and in deed -- for the undeserved kindness that He has shown and continues to show us in this Union.