

Parshat Beha'alotecha 5782

זָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר־נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֵנָם אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֲבֹטְחִים וְאֶת־הַחֲצִיר
 וְאֶת־הַבָּצְלִים וְאֶת־הַשּׁוּמִים *“We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt
 free of charge, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions,
 and the garlic” (11:5)*

The Bnei Yisrael complained. They asked for fish and meat which they said they remembered eating in Mitzrayim for free. They moaned that they now only had the מָן (manna).

However, the gemara tells us that the מָן could taste like anything in the world. So, what were they really complaining about?

The Talmud tells us that a tzadik found his מָן at the door of his tent. Someone less righteous would have to go further. A rasha had to seek theirs far away. Reshaim also had to grind it and cook it, to make it edible. Others only had to grind it. A tzadik didn't have to process it at all.

But these differentials didn't define the totality of a person. Every morning no-one knew, until they opened their tent, how far they would have to go to collect their מָן. Yesterday by the front door but today they might have to rummage far away to find it. So, everyone saw where everyone else was having to go to collect their מָן. Can you imagine how embarrassing that must have been?

But the Bnei Yisrael said they remembered eating the fish and meat and other food in Mitzrayim חֵנָם. חֵנָם is often translated here as “free of charge” but did we really get our food in Mitzrayim for free?

I don't think so, bearing in mind Paro wouldn't even give us straw. Rashi quotes the Sifri and interprets חֵנָם to mean “freedom from mitzvot”. In other words, the Bnei Yisrael were complaining that when they ate in Mitzrayim, no-one knew what they were doing in private (apart, of course, from HKBH). They wanted the food of Mitzrayim, not for its flavour but because it came with no strings attached. Whereas in the midbar every day their food told the story of who they really were. Every day their true level of observance was revealed. The Bnei Yisrael were more frightened of being embarrassed than being physically tormented by the Mitzriyim.

Rashbam says that מָן is Egyptian for “what is it”.

But Ibn Ezra disagrees, saying that the expression מָן is an Arabic word which is only used when asking about a person, not food. The word מָן he says, refers to a person. So, it means “**who** is it” not “what is it”. This is because the מָן exposed who a person truly is.

What do we know about anyone? We must be dan lechaf zechut but there are exceptions e.g., when it comes to shidduchim or business partnership. Giving a reference is a serious matter and should be limited to what one actually knows. We never see the whole person so every reference must be limited. The מָן removed that element of privacy and exposed us to each other for who we really are.

Frightening!

(Based on a shiur given by Rabbi Shlomo Farhi)