

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Be'haalosecha

The Episode of Kivros Ha'taava

וְהָאִסְפָּסֶף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבּוֹ הִתְאַוּוּ תִּאְוָה וַיָּשִׁבוּ וַיִּבְכוּ גַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בֶּשֶׂה. זָכְרָנוּ אֶת הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֵנֶם אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֲבִטְחִים וְאֶת הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת הַבְּצָלִים וְאֶת הַשּׁוּמִים. וְעַתָּה נִפְשָׁנוּ יִבֶּשֶׂה אֵין כֹּל בְּלִתֵּי אֵל הַמָּן עֵינֵינוּ.

The rabble that was among them desired a desire, and the Children of Israel also wept again and said, "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt for free, the cucumbers, melon, leeks onions and garlic. But now, our soul is dry, there is nothing, our eyes turn only to the manna."¹

INTRODUCTION AND SOME QUESTIONS

These verses, which introduce the tragic episode known as Kivros Ha'taava – The Graves of Desire, are somewhat perplexing and require much contemplation. Let us open with a few of the many questions relating to these and the following verses:

1. **The People's Complaint:** Verse 5 lists a number of foods which the people recall with fondness and nostalgia that they would eat when they were slaves in Egypt. There is a well-known tradition cited in the Talmud² that the manna could taste like whatever the person wanted it to. If so, the Gemara asks, why did the people have to miss any type of food?
2. **The Taste of the Manna:** In the ensuing verses, which describe the manna, the Torah states: "וְהָיָה טַעְמוֹ כְּטַעַם לֶשֶׁד הַשֶּׁמֶן" – and its taste was like the taste of dough kneaded with oil." This, too, is difficult in light of the above, whereby the manna tasted like whatever one wanted it to. If so, why is it assigned a specific taste? Are we to assume that this was the "default" taste in the event that a person had no thoughts one way or the other?
3. **A Dual Reaction:** Verse 10 states that, in response to all the people's complaining: "וַיַּחַר אֵף ה' מְאֹד וַבְּעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה רָע" – Hashem's anger flared greatly, and in Moshe's eyes it was bad." What is the final phrase adding? Presumably, if Hashem was angry at the people, it was a bad situation and would be so in anyone's eyes. As such, to state this regarding Moshe appears entirely redundant!
4. **Moshe's Complaint:** In verses 11-14, Moshe complains bitterly to Hashem over the situation, "לָמָּה הִרְעַתָּ לְעַבְדְּךָ... מֵאֵין לִי בֶּשֶׂר לְתֵת לְכָל הָעָם הַזֶּה... וְאִם כָּכָה אֶת עֲשֵׂה לִי הֲרֹגֵנִי נָא הֲרֹג אִם מִצְאָתָי"

1 Bamidbar 11:4-6.

2 Yoma 75b.

חַן בְּעֵינַי וְאֵל אֶרְאֶה בְּרָעָתִי – *Why have You done evil to Your servant... From where shall I get meat to give to this entire people... And if this is what You do to me, then kill me now, if I have found favor in Your eyes, and let me not see my evil.*” What is behind such an extreme reaction? What is so difficult in Moshe’s eyes about this episode in particular, to the extent that he would prefer to die rather than take care of it?

5. Hashem’s Response to Moshe: Verse 15 relates that, in response to Moshe’s complaint, Hashem instructs him to gather seventy elders who will bear the burden of the people together with him. How does assembling seventy elders help deal with the issue at hand, which is the provision of meat for the people? Are these seventy elders to be tasked with finding it? As we know, the meat came in the form of quails from heaven!

All these questions require our attention.

YOU EAT WHAT YOU ARE – THE MANNA AS COMMENTARY

The Talmud informs us that the manna fell in the merit of Moshe Rabbeinu.³ The full implication of this idea is that the food for which Moshe served as a conduit partook of the lofty spiritual level that he had attained. And indeed, this was no ordinary food. The Talmud elsewhere⁴ informs us that the experiences of the Jewish people regarding the manna were not uniform. Rather, the way in which the people obtained the manna depended on their own spiritual status. The Gemara mentions two areas where this expressed itself:

1. Location: for the righteous, the manna fell at their doorstep, while for those whose behavior was remiss it fell outside the camp, requiring them to journey in order to collect it.
2. Preparation: For the righteous, the manna arrived ready to eat and did not require any preparation, while for the wicked, it had to be ground and cooked or baked like normal food.

To these two areas of distinction, the Malbim⁵ adds a third:

3. Taste: The idea that the manna could taste like whatever wanted it to was only true for the righteous. For the wicked, however, the manna had a standard and unchanging taste – that of “dough kneaded in oil.”

It should come as no surprise therefore, that the ones who were the first to complain about the manna were the אֲסִפְסוּי – the lower echelons of the people, whose behavior resulted in eating manna being not such an enjoyable experience for them. After all, even just collecting it involved a long and awkward hike outside the camp, no doubt with many inquisitive eyes following the degenerate forager throughout his unfortunate wanderings.

3 Taanis 9a.

4 Yoma 75a.

5 Commentary to Parshas Be’haalosecha.

FOR WHOM THE MANN FALLS

In Parshas Ekev, Moshe states regarding the manna:

וַיַּעַנְךָ וַיְרַעֲבֶךָ וַיֹּאכִלְךָ אֶת הַמָּן

[Hashem] afflicted you and made you hunger and fed you the manna.⁶

If, as the verse proceeds to say, Hashem gave the people manna – the most choice of foods – why does it also say that He afflicted them and made them hunger?

There were some people whose behavior resulted in their manna falling so far away that they preferred to go hungry rather than trek for miles looking for their food. Thus, in the morning when their neighbors were collecting the manna from their doorsteps, in response to their querying looks as to where this person's portion was, he would reply, "Don't worry, I'm fine. I davened *neitz* and ate early."⁷

Additionally, for these people even when the food was prepared, it would have the same uniform taste. This is what was behind the people's reminiscing over the different foods they would eat in Egypt. These tastes, while perhaps available in the manna to others whose spiritual state allowed it, were inaccessible to them. In this vein, verse 8 outlines the three areas in which the manna experience was problematic for some people:

- ▷ The people would travel and gather – collecting the manna required travelling outside the camp to obtain it.
- ▷ and grind it in a mill... and cook it in a pot and make it into cakes – after collecting it, it needed preparation before being ready for consumption.
- ▷ and its taste was like the taste of dough kneaded with oil – the taste did not change or vary.

Needless to say, the alternative to their predicament, namely, of actually improving their behavior and thereby accessing the manna's higher qualities, was no more palatable to them. Therefore, the people desired ordinary physical food which would made no religious demands of them nor would it serve as a reminder when their behavior was deficient. Additionally, what began with the rabble soon spread to the people at large, many of whom found the commentary of the manna on the areas in which they were neglectful likewise inconvenient. With this in mind, we can understand how the complaints about the manna were a product of the people "travelling from Hashem's mountain,"⁸ representing the relaxing of the religious and moral standards with which they had been charged there.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MOSHE

With this background in mind, we understand the two reactions described by the verse to the people's complaints. One the one hand, it states that Hashem was angry with them for their lapse itself. However, in addition to this, the verse relates that it was bad in Moshe's eyes. This is not merely corroborating Hashem's view of the situation, rather, there was something about these events which could potentially be very bad for Moshe.

6 Devarim 8:3.

7 Heard from Rabbi Isaac Bernstein *zt"l*.

8 10:33.

As we mentioned, the elevated spiritual food that the people were currently eating through Moshe's merit was parallel to his own exalted spiritual state. For him to now become the conduit for feeding them ordinary physical food would require that he experience a spiritual decline or demotion and become more physical himself. This is why Moshe complained so bitterly on this occasion, stating that he would prefer death to feeding the people meat. With this, Moshe was stating that he would rather leave the world on the spiritual level he had attained than remain and suffer a lowering of that level.

We can now understand, on a deeper level, Hashem's response to Moshe's complaint of telling him to gather seventy elders around him. These elders, who were on a more physical level than Moshe, would serve as an additional conduit between him and the people, allowing for the divine influence that came through Moshe to achieve further physical definition and become the meat that the people desired.

It should be noted, however, that all this was purely a situational response to the people's demand for physical food. It was not, however, a solution to the actual problem, which was their lack of preparedness to be held to the standards set forth at Sinai. That solution could only come from the people themselves, as they developed and matured over time through much of the trial and error that makes up the episodes of Chumash Bamidbar. Indeed, it is a process that continues throughout Jewish history – a teacher possessed of rare patience and a preparedness to repeat the relevant lessons again and again until they are finally and fully absorbed within the students. May we merit soon to graduate from its tutelage and complete the journey from Hashem's mountain which we began all those centuries ago, striding toward the final redemption!