**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BEHAALOTEKHA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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In memory of my amazing mother Ocotian bat Candelaria z”l   
whose yarhtzeith is Sivan 12th

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Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Beha’alotekha the unfortunate story of Kivrot Ha-ta’ava, where *Benei Yisrael* complained to Moshe about the conditions in the travel, expressing their dissatisfaction with the manna, and their desire for meat and vegetables. God was angry at the people for their complaints, and many of them were killed.

While the simple reading of the text indicates that the people complained about food, the Gemara (Yoma 75a), cited by Rashi (11:10), states that the people also complained about the laws of *arayot*, which forbid marriage and intimate relations between family members and certain relatives.

Leaving aside the broader question as to the connection between *arayot* and the people’s complaint about the lack of variety of food in the desert, a number of writers addressed the technical question as to whether the *arayot* prohibitions indeed applied at that time as a practical matter. The event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, when God revealed Himself to *Benei Yisrael* and they entered into a formal covenant with Him, is seen as the model of *geirut* (conversion), and the procedure of a gentile’s conversion is modeled after *Ma’amad Har Sinai*. The Gemara in Masekhet Keritut (9a) teaches: “Just as your forefathers entered into the covenant through circumcision, immersion and the sprinkling of [sacrificial] blood, similarly, they [converts] shall enter into the covenant through circumcision, immersion and the sprinkling of [sacrificial] blood.” One of the rules that apply to a convert is “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*” – a convert is halakhically considered “reborn” at the time of his conversion, such that he is no longer halakhically related to his biological relatives (Yevamot 22a). On the level of Torah law, then, a convert is allowed to marry any family member. *Chazal* later enacted that this should not be done, but before this enactment, such marriages were allowed. Seemingly, then, *Benei Yisrael*, who underwent “conversion” at the time of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, were permitted to marry their family members. The question thus becomes why they protested the laws of *arayot*, which were not relevant to them as a practical matter.

The Maharal of Prague, in his *Gur Aryeh*, answered that the *geirut* which *Benei Yisrael* underwent at the time of *Matan Torah* differed from standard *geirut*, in that it was compulsory. Whereas a convert chooses on his own to join *Am Yisrael* and enter into the covenant with God, *Benei Yisrael* were not given any option. As the Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (88a) famously states, God “suspended the mountain over them” and threatened to kill them if they refused the Torah. Whether one understands this description literally or figuratively, it is clear that the covenant was forced upon *Benei Yisrael*. The Maharal asserts that the rule of “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*” applies only to one who chooses to enter into the covenant, but not when one is coerced into doing so, as *Benei Yisrael* were. Therefore, they remained halakhically related to their biological family members, and the laws of *arayot* applied.

A number of later writers struggled to understand the explanation for this distinction. If conversion marks a person’s “rebirth,” such that he loses his previous familial connections, then why should it matter whether the conversion was done voluntarily or under coercion?

Some explained that the “rebirth” of conversion results from the convert’s firm, resolute decision to disconnect himself from his past. This decision to leave everything he had known and create a new self-identity – as a member of God’s special nation – has the halakhic effect of dissolving all his previous legal relationships. At Mount Sinai, however, *Benei Yisrael* did not make a decision to dissociate themselves from their past. To the contrary, *Ma’amad Har Sinai* marked the culmination of a process that began centuries earlier, in the times of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, to whom God promised that He would forge a special relationship with their offspring. Unlike in the case of normal conversions, *Benei Yisrael* were not called upon to dissociate from their past, but rather built upon their past, entering into a covenant to finalize the special relationship that had begun to be created generations earlier. (An explanation along these lines is offered by Rav Naftali Trop, in *Chiddushei Ha-Granat*, Yevamot, 11.)

This distinction is certainly understandable, but it does not appear to be the Maharal’s intent, as he emphasized the difference between a voluntary conversion and a coerced process of conversion.

[Rav Asher Weiss](https://www.torahbase.org/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%A0%D7%A9%D7%90-%D7%92%D7%A8-%D7%A9%D7%A0%D7%AA%D7%92%D7%99%D7%99%D7%A8-%D7%9B%D7%A7%D7%98%D7%9F-%D7%A9%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%9C%D7%93-%D7%93%D7%9E%D7%99/) suggests a slightly different distinction between *Ma’amad Har Sinai* and ordinary *geirut*, differentiating between an individual conversion, and the conversion of an entire nation. As *Benei Yisrael* all “converted” together, they retained their relationships with one another. The rule of “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*” applies when an individual convert, or a group of converts, leave their nation to join *Am Yisrael*. In *Benei Yisrael*’s case, however, they all joined together, as a single entity, without leaving a different nation, and so they did not relinquish their familial connections.

Sunday

Parashat Beha’alotekha concludes with the story of Miriam’s being stricken with *tzara’at* (leprosy) as a punishment for speaking derogatorily about her brother, Moshe. During the time she was afflicted with *tzara’at*, for seven days, she was required to remain outside the Israelite camp (12:14-15). This followed the law requiring somebody who was determined to be a *metzora* (person stricken with *tzara’at*) to remain quarantined outside the camp until he was healed (Vayikra 13:46).

The Gemara in Masekhet Zevachim (101b-102a) raises the question as to how the halakhic process of determining Miriam’s status unfolded. If a person is stricken with *tzara’at*, even if the discoloration clearly and unmistakably meets *Halakha*’s criteria for *tzara’at*, he does not attain the formal status of *metzora* until he is examined by a *kohein* and the *kohein* declares him a *metzora*. The Gemara thus wonders who declared Miriam a *metzora*. The Torah states that at the time she was punished, she was alone with Moshe and Aharon. Moshe, the Gemara says, was ineligible to declare her a *metzora* because he was not a *kohein*, and Aharon was not eligible for this role because he was her family member. The Gemara concludes that the Almighty Himself made this proclamation, and it was He who conferred upon Miriam the halakhic status of a *metzora*.

The Maharsha wonders why the Gemara said that Moshe was disqualified only because he was not a *kohein*. After all, like Aharon, he was Miriam’s brother, and so he was ineligible to pronounce her a *metzora* also because of his familial relationship to her. Why, then, did the Gemara mention only that Moshe was not a *kohein*?

Rav Avraham Gurwicz, in his *Or Avraham al Ha-Torah* (vol. 3, p. 193), cites a creative answer to this question in the name of Rav Meir Yechiel Halstock, the Ostrovtser Rebbe (in his *Meir Einei Chakhamim*). As we discussed yesterday, the event of *Ma’amad Har Sinai* marked *Benei Yisrael*’s “*geirut*” (conversion), whereby they entered into a covenant with God. However, unlike in the case of standard *geirut*, they were not subject to the rule of “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*,” which establishes that after converting, a convert is no longer considered halakhically related to any of his family members. He is, in a sense, born anew, such that he is no longer legally connected to his relatives, and so, on the level of Torah, he may even marry his relatives (though this is forbidden by force of rabbinic enactment). After *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, however, *Benei Yisrael* remained halakhically related to their family members, despite having undergone “*geirut*” at the time of the Revelation. This can be proven from Rashi’s remark earlier in Parashat Beha’alotekha (11:10), based on the Gemara (Yoma 75a), that *Benei Yisrael* complained after journeying from Sinai about the Torah’s restrictions against marrying relatives. The Maharal of Prague (in his *Gur Aryeh*) explains that the rule of “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*” applies only to converts who make the willed decision to join *Am Yisrael*. At *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, however, *Benei Yisrael* were not given the option of whether or not to enter into the covenant with God. They were forced to make this commitment, and therefore the principle of “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*” did not apply to them.

If so, Rav Gurwicz explains, then it is quite possible that – at least according to the Maharal – Moshe himself was indeed subject to the rule of “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*.” We might reasonably assume that Moshe, the one who ascended to the top of Mount Sinai and received the Torah from God which he then taught the people, was not included in the coercion, and willfully committed himself to God’s law. If so, then he was considered “born anew” after the Revelation, such that he was no longer halakhically related to his biological family members. Hence, he was not Miriam’s brother, and thus if he would have been a *kohein*, he would have been eligible to confer upon her the status of *metzora*.

Of course, this explanation assumes the Maharal’s theory, that the rule of “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*” did not apply to *Benei Yisrael* after the Revelation only because they accepted the Torah under duress. As we saw yesterday, however, other explanations have been offered for why this rule did not apply (such as the fact that they were not rejecting their past, but rather continuing the process which began in the time of their ancestors).

Interestingly, this issue might perhaps be reflected in the question regarding the source to show respect to one’s father-in-law. The *Shulchan Arukh* (Y.D. 240:24) rules that one is obligated to respect his father-in-law (and the *Be’er Heiteiv*, citing the *Bach*, adds that this applies also to one’s mother-in-law, and the *Pitchei Teshuva* notes that this is indicated by the *Shulchan Arukh* later, 374:7). The *Taz* writes that the source of this requirement is the respect shown by King David to his father-in-law, King Shaul. (Incidentally, it is worth noting that David showed respect to Shaul despite the virulent hostility with which Shaul treated him. If, indeed, this forms the basis of the obligation to respect one’s in-laws, then we may reasonably conclude that this obligation applies even if one has legitimate grievances against his in-laws, as in the case of King David…) The Vilna Gaon, however, in *Bei’ur Ha-Gra*, writes that the source of this requirement is the respect with which Moshe treated his father-in-law, Yitro. The Gaon’s comment, of course, presumes that Moshe was halakhically considered Yitro’s son-in-law. The *Taz*, who did not point to Moshe’s respect for Yitro as the source of this obligation, perhaps felt that Moshe was subject to the principle of “*ger she-nitgayeir ke-katan she-nolad dami*,” and was therefore not, technically, Yitro’s son-in-law, such that his honor for Yitro does not establish a model of respect for one’s father-in-law.

However, this would seemingly depend on whether Yitro’s arrival at the Israelite camp, where he was welcomed by Moshe with great honor, occurred before or after *Matan Torah*, an issue debated by the *Amoraim* (Zevachim 116a). If this story occurred before *Matan Torah*, as it appears from the text (Shemot 18), then Moshe was certainly still considered Yitro’s son-in-law, as he had yet to undergo the experience of *Ma’amad Har Sinai*. (See Rav Tzvi Kreizer’s discussion in [*Aspaklaria*, Parashat Beha’alotekha, 5779](http://beinenu.com/sites/default/files/alonim/211_36_79_0.pdf), pp. 13-15.)

Monday

We read in Parashat Beha’alotekha of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints to Moshe about the lack of the food in the wilderness. They demanded that they be given meat, fondly recalled the variety of foods that were available to them in Egypt, and expressed their disdain for the manna which they were fed. God severely punished the people, killing those who complained and demanded meat.

Earlier this week, we mentioned the view in the Gemara (Yoma 75a) that the people complained not about the limited food supply, but rather about the Torah’s restrictions of *arayot* – forbidden marital relationships. According to this view, the people protested the prohibitions that were added at the time of *Matan Torah* limiting options of whom one may marry. Although *Benei Yisrael* faithfully observed even beforehand the restrictions imposed by the Noachide laws upon all mankind, they resented the additional restrictions which went into effect when the Torah was given.

The question arises as to why this view would suggest such a strained, far-fetched reading of the text. It is abundantly clear from the verses that the people complained about food. They cried, “Who will feed us meat?” (11:4), and reminisced about the fish and vegetables they enjoyed in Egypt, even specifying the particular delicacies (such as onion and garlic – 11:5). Why would anyone suggest that the people were in truth complaining about the Torah’s supposedly restrictive sexual code?

One possibility we might consider is that this view in the Gemara seeks to answer the question of why the people acted and spoke with such panic and desperation. The Torah tells that the people did not merely complain, but wept: “Moshe heard the people crying by family…” (11:10). Ibn Ezra explains this to mean that families gathered to weep “as they would do when crying over a deceased [loved one].” The people went into a state of mourning over their conditions in the desert, which, they must have known, were only temporary. They were to have entered the Land of Israel and begun cultivating the fertile land in a matter of just weeks, and yet they lamented the lack of a variety in their diet in the interim period. It was to explain this drastic behavior, perhaps, that one view in the Gemara understood that the people were not simply complaining about food. According to this opinion, the austere conditions in the desert indicated to the people that God did not want them to enjoy the delights of the world. They saw the lack of a selection of food not as a temporary condition necessitated by the journey through the desert to the Land of Israel, but rather as God’s vision and prescription for their lives of service to Him. They pointed to the Torah’s restrictions on marriage as an indication that God wants them to suffer, allegedly proving that the austerity of their existence in the desert was not temporary, but the way it was always going to be. And so they panicked, and went into a state of mourning.

This might explain the Midrash’s famous comment (cited by the Ramban, 10:35; and *Tosafot*, Shabbat 116a) that *Benei Yisrael* journeyed from Mount Sinai “joyfully, like a child running away from school,” exclaiming, “Lest He give us more commands.” This description frames for us the subsequent events – the people’s complaints against Moshe and God – by revealing to us the people’s mindset at this time. They pictured God in their minds not as a loving, compassionate father who warmly and tenderly cared for them and forged a special relationship with them, but rather as a strict, harsh ruler who had an interest in making them miserable. This image of God led them to assume that both His commands and their limited food options in the desert were indications of His contempt for them. And so they wept and mourned, having concluded that they were condemned to misery and deprivation, failing to trust that God forged a covenant with them for their benefit, and not, Heaven forbid, the opposite.

Tuesday

After telling of *Benei Yisrael*’s journey from Mount Sinai, where they had been encamped for nearly a year, the Torah, in a pair of verses (10:35-6) tells of the brief prayer that Moshe recited when the ark began traveling, and the prayer he recited when the ark encamped. These two verses are set apart in the Torah scroll with unusual symbols (shaped like an inverted letter *nun*), which appear as parentheses surrounding these verses. The Gemara famously discusses these markings in Masekhet Shabbat (115b-116a), and it brings one view claiming that these “parentheses” indicate that this pair of verses should have really appeared earlier in the text. Specifically, they should have been included in the Torah’s lengthy discussion of the arrangement in which *Benei Yisrael* traveled, earlier in Sefer Bamidbar, as Moshe’s prayers were part of the procedure of travel. These places were “transplanted” from their natural location and brought here, the Gemara teaches, “to separate between one calamity and another.” In order not to present the accounts of two tragic events in immediate succession of one another, the Torah inserted this pair of verses in order to disrupt the flow of the narrative and thereby make a separation in between the two tragedies.

The Gemara proceeds to identify the two calamities which are “separated” by this pair of verses. The second calamity, as the Gemara notes, is clear – the story of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints during travel, for which they were severely punished. This story appears in the text immediately following the “parenthetical” pair of verses. Before this pair of verses, however, there does not appear to be an account of any tragic event. The Gemara explains that the tragedy preceding these verses is *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Mount Sinai: “*Vayis’u mei-Har Hashem*” – “They journeyed from the Mountain of the Lord” (10:33). The Ramban (to 10:35) and *Tosafot* (Shabbat 116) understand the Gemara’s comment based on the Midrash’s famous criticism of the way *Benei Yisrael* journeyed from Mount Sinai, describing them as leaving “joyfully, like a child running away from school.” The people felt relieved that they were leaving Mount Sinai and would not be receiving any more commands. The Gemara considers this inappropriate glee a “calamity” which needed to be separated from the subsequent calamity of the people’s complaints about their conditions in the desert.

The Saba of Slobodka (*Or Ha-tzafun*, vol. 3, p. 34, cited and discussed by [Rav Nechemya Raanan](https://www.etzion.org.il/he/%D7%9B%D7%AA%D7%99%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%A7-%D7%A9%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A6%D7%90-%D7%9E%D7%91%D7%99%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A1%D7%A4%D7%A8-%D7%95%D7%A8%D7%A5)) explained this depiction of *Benei Yisrael* as they departed Mount Sinai – “like a child running away from school” – by noting the contrast to a description of *Benei Yisrael*’s earlier journey, from the Sea of Reeds. After the miracle of the splitting of the sea, and *Benei Yisrael*’s song of praise to God for this miracle, the Torah tells, “Moshe had the Israelites journey from the Sea of Reeds” (Shemot 15:22), and Rashi, citing the *Mekhilta*, explains this to mean that Moshe needed to pull the people away from the shores of the sea against their will. The Egyptian chariots which had pursued *Benei Yisrael* and then drowned in the sea were laden with golden and silver, and these riches washed ashore. *Benei Yisrael* did not want to leave the seashore, busy as they were collecting the precious ornaments of their former oppressors. And so Moshe needed to pull them away.

The Saba of Slobodka commented that *Benei Yisrael* did not actually leave Sinai “like a child running away from school.” Rather, the Midrash means that they did not leave Mount Sinai with the same reluctance with which they had left the shores of the sea. When the time came to leave the seashore and proceed to the next stage of their destiny, the people wanted to wait until they had collected all the riches they could find. But when the time came to leave Sinai, there was no such hesitation. There was no interest in remaining to collect more spiritual riches as there was interest at the sea in remaining to collect more material riches. *Chazal* criticize this contrast by depicting *Benei Yisrael* as being all too eager to journey from Sinai, as though they were children running from school.

In conclusion, it is worth citing Rabbi Norman Lamm’s eloquent observation of the modern-day relevance of this Midrashic passage (in [a sermon](https://archives.yu.edu/gsdl/collect/lammserm/index/assoc/HASH057c.dir/doc.pdf) delivered in 1964):

*Do we not experience this attitude all too often in our own lives, in our own society? All too frequently we approach our religious obligations in a manner more belabored than beloved. Our observance lacks joy, it lacks love, it lacks inner attachment. We, whom this age of automation has given so much leisure, come to the synagogue to worship, and we begrudge the time we spend on prayer. We carefully monitor our sessions in the synagogue with our watch. Heaven forbid lest services continue beyond the prescribed time!*

*…All this points to a lack of love, an absence of inner commitment, and therefore a religion which is joyless and unhappy. It is the approach…of a child who flees from rather than to school. It is the grievous error of spiritual truancy. And this indeed is the first great…catastrophe of any people.*

Wednesday

Parashat Behaalotekha begins with a brief reiteration of the command to kindle the *menorah* in the *Mishkan*, and Rashi (in most editions of his commentary) famously offers an explanation for the purpose of this reiteration here in this *parasha*. Based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, Rashi writes that when the *nesi’iim* (tribal leaders) offered their special gifts and offerings to celebrate the *Mishkan*’s inauguration, as we read in the conclusion of the previous *parasha*, Aharon felt uneasy. All the tribes were represented in this celebration, except for his tribe – the tribe of Levi, and so Aharon felt he missed out on this special opportunity. God sought to allay Aharon’s concerns by reminding him of the special privilege he had to minister in the *Mishkan* each day, and so He reiterated the command of the daily kindling of the *menorah*.

Aharon’s reaction to the offerings of the *nesi’im*, as depicted in the Midrash, perhaps represents the uneasiness and insecurity we often feel when we observe people achieving in ways which we cannot. If we are spiritually conscientious and ambitious, the accomplishments of others could lead us to worry that we are not accomplishing enough ourselves, that we are failing if we are not doing the special things that they are doing. In some instances, this may be correct, and indeed, at times we may and we should draw inspiration and motivation from other people’s achievements, in the spirit of the famous dictum, “*Kin’at sofrim tarbeh chokhma*” – “Envy among scholars increases wisdom” (Bava Batra 21a). More generally, however, our reaction to such feelings must be – like God told Aharon – to focus our attention on our particular role, rather than feel threatened by the roles filled by other people. Their impressive accomplishments in no way undermines the value or importance of our own accomplishments. No two people are meant to achieve the same way. The fact that others achieve in ways that we do not or cannot, should not cause us to worry that we are failing to achieve enough.

Parashat Behaalotekha concludes with the story of Miriam, who was punished for voicing inappropriate criticism of her brother, Moshe. Rashi (12:1-2), based on the *Sifrei*, explains that Moshe had separated from his wife because he felt he would have otherwise been unable to maintain the special level of spiritual focus which his unique stature of prophecy required. Miriam criticized this decision, asking, “Did the Lord speak only to Moshe? Did He not speak also to us?!” (12:2). If other prophets could remain married, Miriam argued, then so could Moshe. God responded to Miriam by emphasizing Moshe’s unique, unparalleled spiritual stature (12:12:7-8).

Miriam, in a sense, made the same mistake as Aharon did in the beginning of the *parasha*, only in the converse. Aharon felt concerned that he did not do what others did, whereas Miriam criticized Moshe for not doing what she did. The mistaken assumption underlying both these responses to other people’s conduct is that one person’s way of doing things is necessarily right for another person. Just as it is wrong to think that we must conduct our religious live precisely the same way as other people, so is it wrong to think that others must conduct their religious lives precisely the same way we do. We should feel comfortable with our unique capabilities and unique role which we try to fulfill, and also respect other people’s uniqueness and their quest to pursue the path which they are meant to follow.

Thursday

The Gemara, in a famous passage (Shabbat 115b-116a), discusses the pair of verses in Parashat Beha’alotekha (10:35-36) which tell of Moshe’s prayer each time the ark began journeying when *Benei Yisrael* traveled, and each time the ark stopped when the time came to encamp. According to one view in the Gemara, these verses were to have appeared earlier in Sefer Bamidbar, but the Torah presented them here in order to “separate between one calamity and another.” The Torah did not wish to have two tragic events related one immediately after the other, and so it disrupted the flow of the narrative with this pair of verses. As the Gemara notes, the calamity which is told after these verses is the story of the “*mit’onenim*,” those among *Benei Yisrael* who complained during travel, resulting in a deadly fire sent by God (11:1). The first tragic event, however, is far less obvious, and the Gemara identifies it as *Benei Yisrael*’s journey from Mount Sinai (“*Vayis’u mei-Har Hashem*” – 10:33), commenting that this means, “They turned away from God.” As we discussed earlier this week, a number of commentators explain that the Gemara refers here to the famous tradition that *Benei Yisrael* journeyed from Mount Sinai “like a child running away from school,” with glee, relieved that they would not be receiving more commands, and this marked the first “calamity.”

Rashi, however, explains the Gemara’s comment differently. He writes (Shabbat 116a) that within several days of leaving Mount Sinai, some among the nation began demanding meat – in the incident of *Kivrot Ha-ta’ava*, which the Torah tells later – for which they were killed by God. Meaning, the “calamity” of “they turned away from God” was that several days later, they complained and demanded more food. Curiously, Rashi understood that already at the time of *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Mount Sinai, the foundations for the tragedy of *Kivrot Ha-ta’ava* were laid, and this is the first “calamity” which the Torah needed to separate from the subsequent calamity by transplanting a pair of verses.

Netziv, in *Herchev Davar* (to 11:4), explains Rashi’s understanding of the Gemara, writing that when *Benei Yisrael* left Mount Sinai, the people already then craved meat and resented the manna – and this was the tragedy, that they left Mount Sinai with this inappropriate mindset. However, Netziv writes, at that point, the people restrained themselves from expressing demands for a more varied menu. That changed after the “*mit’onenim*,” the first group of people who complained about the long trek through the desert. The seeds of *Kivrot Ha-ta’ava* existed already when the people left Mount Sinai, as already at that point they desired a greater variety of food, but this desire did not lead to angry complaints and protests until later, after the incident of the “*mit’onenim*.” (Netziv explains on this basis the otherwise difficult term “*vayashuvu*” used by the Torah in reference to the people who demanded meat (11:4), claiming that this means that the people “returned” to their suppressed feelings of discontentment that had simmered already for several days.)

It seems, according to Netziv, that the “*mit’onenim*” had the effect of emboldening those who craved meat. These people managed to contain their dissatisfaction – until they saw a different group voice their complaints. This precedent, the complaints and protests expressed by the “*mit’onenim*,” is what led this second group to inappropriately demand meat and complain about the miraculous manna mercifully provided for them each morning.

This sequence of events, as understood by Netziv, perhaps shows how negativity is oftentimes contagious. An attitude of unjustified discontent, of complaining about what’s wrong instead of enjoying and celebrating what’s right, has a way of spreading. When we grumble and criticize, we encourage others to do the same. Conversely, when we approach the world and life with a positive, upbeat and optimistic outlook, rejoicing over what we have rather than lamenting what we lack, we exude positive energy that can spread to and uplift the people around us. When we are able to feel happy and content, rather than embittered and resentful, we not only enjoy greater peace of mind, but also energize other people and thereby do our share to spread joy and goodwill in our surroundings and throughout the world.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Beha’alotekha tells the story of *Kivrot Ha-ta’ava*, where members of *Benei Yisrael* complained about the manna, the heavenly food which they were fed in the wilderness, and demanded meat. This story ended in tragedy, with God killing those who made these inappropriate complaints and demands.

In relating this incident, the Torah describes the procedure by which *Benei Yisrael* ate the manna: “The people would go around and collect [the manna], grind it in a mill, or crush it in a mortar, and cook it in a pot, making it into cakes…” (11:8). As Rashi (11:7) explains, the Torah interjected this description to criticize the people for their complaints, emphasizing that the manna was a great blessing and miraculous gift which they enjoyed each day, and which certainly did not warrant angry complaints and protests.

Commenting on the Torah’s description, Rashi, based on the *Sifrei*, writes that the people did not actually grind, pound or cook the manna. According to Rashi, the Torah here means that the people would experience any taste they wanted when eating the manna. If they wanted the manna to taste like it was ground into flour and then baked into a cake, then this is precisely what it would taste like. Ibn Ezra, however, explained differently, claiming that the Torah here speaks of the different options that *Benei Yisrael* had when eating the manna. They could, if they so desired, enjoy it in the form in which they received it, or, they had the option of grinding it into a flour and baking it. A third option was to crush it with a mortar and pestle and boil it in a pot.

Chizkuni advances a generally similar approach, though he attributes the different methods of consumption to the different groups among the people. He writes that the righteous among the nation would eat the manna in its raw form, precisely the way it arrived. The “*beinonim*”(“moderately” righteous) would process the manna to some degree, either grinding or crushing it into small pieces, whereas the less pious would go through the trouble of baking the manna into cakes. Interestingly, Chizkuni suggests that the *mekosheish eitzim* – the man found collecting wood on Shabbat, in violation of the Shabbat restrictions, as we read later (15:32) – belonged to this final category. Insistent on baking his portion of manna even on Shabbat, he desecrated the holy day by going out to collect firewood.

Clearly, Chizkuni’s criticism of those who found it necessary to process the manna, instead of eating it plain, must be seen in the context of *Benei Yisrael*’s unique conditions in the desert, where they were sustained miraculously. As they received supernatural food which fell from the heavens each morning, taking the time to process it according to one’s specific preference, in Chizkuni’s view, reflected a degree of unbecoming pettiness. This certainly does not mean that under normal conditions, we are discouraged from preparing and enjoying food according to our particular preferences.

Nevertheless, Chizkuni’s comments perhaps warn against excessive preoccupation with material enjoyment, and pedantry and inflexibility when it comes to worldly pleasures. Chizkuni’s criticism of those who found it necessary to prepare their manna to their particular taste teaches that there is something inappropriate about paying too much attention to, and investing too much time and effort to, our worldly enjoyment. While we ae certainly entitled and even encouraged to enjoy the world’s blessings, such as fine food, fine clothing and fine décor, we must avoid the tendency to obsess and fret over the particulars of things such as food, attire and furniture. Just as *Benei Yisrael* encamped in the wilderness around the *Mishkan*, which stood in the center of the camp, so must our lives revolve around *kedusha*. This focus does not require self-denial and extreme ascetic measures (which, most often than not, would undermine our ability to properly serve God), but does require us to exercise moderation and to avoid unreasonable fastidiousness when it comes to our material enjoyment. We should be able to enjoy the “manna” God lovingly sends us each day in a variety of different ways, and not be overly discerning or particular when it comes to our worldly delights.

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