

BEHAALOSCHA (NUMBERS 8:1-12:16)

Let 'Em Eat Doughnuts!

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Some people are just never satisfied.

Can you imagine life in the Sinai desert? The Israelites in the desert lived a miraculous existence. All of their physical needs were provided for them. Clothes never wore out or needed to be altered. No need to go to the mall to buy new shoes, and no need to do any grocery shopping. Manna falls from Heaven, and it tastes like whatever you feel like eating. You like pizza? It tastes like pizza! Cheesecake? You've got it. Prime rib? No problem.

While preparing to enter the Land of Israel, the Children of Israel did not have to worry about tilling the soil to grow their food. The food was there for the taking.

However, there were objections. Suddenly, everyone got hungry:

"Who will feed us meat? We remember the free fish we ate in Egypt; the cucumbers and the melons; the leeks, onions, and garlic. Our souls are dried out; there's nothing to look forward to but manna!"

(Numbers, 11:4-6)

Nothing to look forward to? First of all, as Rashi explains, the Israelites left Egypt with a great deal of livestock. If they were really interested in satisfying their carnivorous desires, meat was but a knife slice away. Why did they complain about a lack of meat? They had plenty!

As for as the complaints about fish and onions, it is true that those foods were not available to them; Rabbi Shimon tells us in the Sifri that manna could duplicate the tastes of any food except those listed. But was it such a sacrifice to give up these foods that were only available in the prison that was Egypt?!!

Ahh! The good old days! Make bricks, be whipped by your Egyptian taskmasters, build pyramids, and watch Jewish children thrown into the Nile. Oh, and by the way, eat all the onions you want!

How could anyone look back fondly on the dreadful days of Egyptian slavery? Obviously, there is more to this complaint than meets the eye. A deficiency of meat, fish, and melons was not the problem; it was an excuse to *kvetch*! What was the REAL problem?

"We remember the free fish we ate in Egypt..." The complaint was that these foods had been available to them for *"FREE."* What is meant by "free"? It certainly doesn't imply a complimentary all-you-can-eat smorgasbord where the Jews could leisurely imbibe sushi and onion dips to their hearts' content!

What they meant was that back in Egypt they had been FREE OF RELIGIOUS OBLIGATIONS! There was no Shabbos, there was no Kashrus. They could eat what they wanted and when they wanted.

This idea is further emphasized by the statement in verse 10 that the people "*cried in their families*." The Talmud tells us that they were crying about "family rules" -- whom you may marry, whom you may not marry. (The Kli Yakar interprets verse 4's request for "*Bosor*" – meat/flesh, as a nostalgic yearning for the loose morals of Egypt; the "sins of the flesh" that had been available to them there.)

It is truly amazing -- a group of people who saw G-d's miracles in saving them from the tortures of Egypt, splitting the Red Sea and thundering forth from Mt. Sinai; after all they had experienced, they were willing to return to the slavery of Egypt in order to regain their "freedom" from G-d's commandments.

Nobody likes to be told what to do. Human nature is such that we will undergo tremendous inconvenience rather than allow ourselves to subjugate our wills to a higher authority.

As children, we start off taking a fifth drink of water rather than complying with Mom's exhortations that we go to bed immediately. As time goes on, whether we drive at 70 miles per hour because the limit is 65, or we bristle at our spouse's loving advice that we should take off a few pounds, we find ourselves bucking the system.

The fact that this advice is in our best interest is irrelevant; no one likes taking orders. In my former life as a smoker, nothing strengthened my resolve to continue smoking more than the demands of my peers that I quit. I knew that I would eventually give up this stupid and dangerous habit, but it had to be on MY timetable, not someone else's.

This problem seems to exist regardless of one's personal level of religious observance. We all tend to draw a line beyond which we are reluctant to be controlled. Many people will observe Torah law when it comes to what they eat and what prayers to say, but once we reach our offices, it sometimes becomes a challenge to extend Torah morality to our business lives. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein, of blessed memory, complained that people would always ask him ritual questions, such as when and if to say certain prayers, but they never bothered to consult him on personal matters, such as where to direct one's charitable dollars, and what educational choices they should make for their children.

What exactly was this manna that our People rejected along with G-d's instructions on how to live our lives? "*The manna was like coriander seed and was the color of 'Bedolach' (a precious stone). People would go for a stroll and gather it. It tasted like dough kneaded in oil.*" (Verses 7-9)

Imagine that! It was light, easy to gather, pleasant to look at, and it tasted like doughnuts! Yet, they were willing to give it up in exchange for cucumbers and leeks!

We must learn to resist this natural tendency to reject Divine guidance. The delicious taste of the manna brings with it the inspiring influence of G-d's commandments. To reject the Torah's values for Egyptian-style "freedom" is the spiritual equivalent of trading away freshly baked pastry in exchange for spoiled sour pickles!

There is a beautiful Chassidic custom that when a child begins to study Torah, each letter of the Hebrew alphabet is covered with honey. The child licks the honey off each letter, an introduction to a lifetime of experiencing the sweetness of Torah.

Have a great Shabbos.

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