

“Thinking Torah”

By Rav Alex Israel – alexisrael99@gmail.com

Beha'alotecha: Flesh or Spirit?

Chavruta Sources:

1. Read the entire Chapter 11. Divide it up into sections.

* How many "stories" do we have here?

* Moshe experiences a crisis of leadership at the same time as the people's lusting for meat. How can these stories be separated out in the pesukim. List which sections deal with the "Moshe and leadership" issue, and which deal with the "meat" issue.

* Why did the Torah decide to "mix" the two episodes?

2. Open up a chumash Shemot.

* Note that Ch.17 is a chapter about cries for food, with "manna" and "meat". It is a similar story. Why does God not get angry there?

* See Nehama Leibowitz's article (in Bamidbar) "The murmurings: a repeat performance."

The Shiur Section:

Our parsha, in almost documentary style, logs the orderly mobilisation of the Israelites as they embark from Mt. Sinai headed on their auspicious expedition to the Land of Israel. The parsha records full details of the signalling (public address) system - the trumpets and clouds of fire - which would initiate travel or encampment (9:15 - 10:10). In the midst of the busy preparations we watch on as Moses extends an invitation to his father in law welcoming him to accompany Israel on their voyage "to the place of which the Lord has said, 'I will give it to you.'" (11:29).

We watch the camp set off towards Eretz Yisrael:

"In the second year, on the twentieth day of the second month, the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle... and the Israelites set out on their journey... They marched from the mountain of the Lord a distance of three days, the ark of the Lord travelling in front of them ... "(10:11,33)

The route on which they embarked was known to take only eleven days (see Deuteronomy 1:2). Soon they would be in the Promised Land. All would seem to be on course until, suddenly, unexpectedly, a crisis erupts in the camp. It begins with a cry, a complaint, and that simple complaint spreads like wild-fire. As we shall see, one trouble generates another, until the whole thing escalates into a full scale crisis and begins to spin out of control.

The first instalment in this episode is the people's desire for meat:

"The rabble in their midst felt a gluttonous craving, and the Israelites wept and said, "If only we had

meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic. Now our souls are dried out. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this Manna to look to! Now the manna was like coriander seed ... the people would go about and gather it, grind it ... boil it in a pot or make it into cakes. It tasted like rich cream. When the dew fell on the camp at night, the Manna would fall upon it. Moses heard the people weeping, every family apart, each person at the entrance of his tent. The Lord was very angry, and in Moses' eyes, it was evil." (11:4-10)

Moses responds somewhat uncharacteristically with a collapse of self-confidence. He hands over his resignation to God!

"Moses said to the Lord, 'Why have you dealt ill with your servant ... that you have laid the burden of this people upon me? ... Where am I to give meat to all this people when they whine before me saying "Give us meat to eat!" I cannot carry this people by myself for it is too much for me. If you will deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg you, and let me see no more of my wretchedness.'" (11:10-15)

God has no plans to let Moses resign. Rather, he comes up with an alternative:

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Gather me seventy of Israel's elders ... and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and I shall put it upon them; they shall share the burden of the people with you, and you shall not bear it alone. And say to the people ... tomorrow you shall eat meat ... You shall eat meat not one day, not two, not even five days, or ten or twenty, but an entire month until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the Lord who is among you crying and saying "Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!"' (11:16-20)

And then this is how it all happens:

"Moses went out and reported God's words to the people. He gathered seventy of the people's elders and stationed them around the Tent. Then the Lord came down in a cloud and spoke to him; He drew upon the spirit that was on him (Moses) and put it upon the seventy elders. And when the spirit rested upon them, they spoke in prophecy and did not cease ... Moses then re-entered the camp together with the seventy elders of Israel.

A wind from the Lord started up and swept quail from the sea and strewed them over the camp, an area covering about a day's journey in either direction, all around the camp and some two cubits deep on the ground. The people set to gathering quail all that day and night and all the next day - even he who gathered least had ten "omers" - and they spread them all around the camp. The meat was still between their teeth ... when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague. The place was called Kivrat Hata'ava (The graves of

the lusting) because the people who had a craving were buried there." (11:24-34)

SOME QUESTIONS

Many questions shout to us from the text as we read, exasperated, this incredible story. So many things happen all at the same time: The inexplicable desire for meat, the strange phenomenon of the prophecy of seventy elders, Moses' uncharacteristic desperation, God's raw anger.

Maybe the first thing that we should note is the unusual joining of what might be considered to be two separate stories. On the one hand, we have a story about a wild craving for meat. The people are restless with only Manna to eat and they want an alternative. God gives a solution by sending the quails and punishes them with a plague. This is the first "story".

The next story - related but still distinct - is the crisis of leadership felt by Moses. In a very uncharacteristic mood of desperation, Moses, the great defender of Israel seems to crumble under the pressures of the leadership role that he has so ably held since before the great Exodus. He expresses a total rejection of his leadership position. The solution is to involve another seventy elders in the leadership. This is the second "story".

Now, these stories are connected but they are hardly a single narrative. One episode transpires in the heart of the Israelite "camp" and around its periphery. The other episode happens in the Tent of Meeting - the place of man-God communication. One is about the people. The other is an internal leadership issue.

4-15	The desire for meat
11-15	Moses' Crisis of leadership
16-17	Prophecy : The seventy elders given by God in response to Moses.
18-22/23	Meat : God responds to the craving for meat by providing the quails.
23-30	Prophecy : the seventy elders
31-34	Meat : the punishment

There is no good reason to mix the stories, but strangely the Torah text chooses to intersperse the stories as if they were one. Why? Are these stories a single story, or are they indeed two separate and distinct happenings?

LEADERSHIP

But there are other questions which might trouble us here. Why does Moses collapse at this point in such an extreme manner? As we have noted, Moses is the classic defender of his people, always deferring the wrath of God against his people and standing up for them [2]. What changed? Is there something about this sin in particular that makes Moses lose heart? Why does Moses act in such an uncharacteristic fashion? And for that matter, what prompts such an unbounded desire for meat on the part of the people. We see them collect huge mounds of meat. Why now? Why does this craving arrive at this particular juncture in the story of the journey to the promised land?

One final question. In what way did seventy prophesising elders assist Moses in his crisis of confidence? We do not see them take up leadership roles. They do not become a national parliament, or a public-action committee. We simply

see them bestowed with the gift of prophecy, or more accurately, they are bestowed with prophecy by virtue of Moses exceptional spiritual power. How did this change Moses' feelings of leadership loneliness, desperation and inability to cope?

MEAT AND MANNA

Let us begin with an examination of the people's complaint.

"The rabble in their midst felt a gluttonous craving, and the Israelites wept and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks , the onions and the garlic. Now our souls are dried out. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this Manna to look to!

The phraseology of this complaint raises a clear contrast or comparison between meat and Manna. Now, for the experienced Bible scholar, one will immediately realise this is not simply a comparison between two foods. In reality this meat-manna connection is really a historical comparison, for this episode reminds us of a similar story that occurred a year earlier when the Israelites were a month out of Egypt. There we read:

"The whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron ... 'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death!' And the lord said, 'I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out each day to gather that day's portion ... The house of Israel named it Manna.'" (Exodus 17:1-4,31)

The stories are very similar. The story in Exodus talks about hunger and God's miraculous solution for that hunger. It also talks about quails [3]. But the differences between the stories are crucial. In the Exodus story, God doesn't get angry. Likewise, in that story, Moshe doesn't lose his cool. In fact the entire episode is conducted in a calm manner, as if God had been just waiting for the people to ask, to formally present them with their desert food, the Manna. Why then, in our case - in the lusting for meat of the nation - does God get so furious? Why does Moses get so distressed? [4]

ONE YEAR LATER

I think that it is precisely because we are now a year later that the second incident is seen as so serious. A year earlier, the Israelites were a slave nation fresh out of Egypt. They were used to being fed by their masters. They found it difficult to fend for themselves. Their plea for food was justified. But now, a year later, after the revelation of Sinai, after the miracles, after the Tabernacle, the people are very different. They have matured and grown. They now have national leaders and systems of government: princes of tribes, judges, and other systems of government. They have formed themselves into a nation with a religious-spiritual ideology. They should have more patience. They should have a more sophisticated way of coping with a problem of this sort.

Furthermore, the cries for food in Exodus were justified. A month out of Egypt, their food provisions fully spent, the

people simply had no food. They were fully justified in their complaint. But here, a year later, they DO have food. They have the Manna. The verses deliberately stress this. The verse tells us how the Manna was a wonderful food that could be "baked" or "boiled". It tasted like "rich cream." Do the Israelites have a right to complain so bitterly, to weep and cry for meat? Are these the correct priorities? Is there truly no food, or is there a different problem? Could it be that the problem is not the Manna, but rather that "our souls are dried out" as the verse indicates? Is the problem in their stomachs or their souls?

But there is also the spiritual dimension. The people should be aware by now that God can provide for them. He has done so in the past. Do they have to wail and bemoan the fact that they left Egypt? Are the nation willing, after all this time; after Sinai, after receiving the Torah, to really return to Egypt for some meat? Are they willing to forgo their role as a Godly nation for an juicy steak?

REVERSING THE PROCESS

In the text, the comparison between Manna and meat becomes more acute, if we compare the way that the two are gathered.

"The people gathered quail all that day and night and all the next day - even he who gathered least had ten "omers" of quail." (11:32)

In the text it is portrayed as an immensely powerful urge, compulsive and unstoppable. This extreme impression of the behaviour of the nation when they get their meat - a landing of quails all around the camp precinct.[6] - is clear from the text. They collect the meat in a crazed, obsessive manner, a frantic hysteria gripping the Israelite camp:

The food that they rejected however, was the Manna. This food is also gathered and it too is measured by the "omer" measure. When we read of the gathering of the Manna, it is described thus:

"Gather as much of it as each of you requires to eat, an 'omer' measure per person The Israelites did so, some gathering much, some little, but when they measured it by the 'omer', he who had gathered more had no excess and he who had gathered little had no deficiency: they had gathered as much as they needed to eat" (Ex. 16:16-18)

The Manna is the expression of a different mindset. It is a mindset of control and limitation rather than frenzied passion. With the Manna, somehow, everyone received according to his need. They gathered more or less and it always amounted to an "omer" measure. With the Manna, everyone gathered only what they needed, not what they desired. And it was always enough. With the quails, nothing was enough, for they were propelled by an inexplicable urge, a powerful lust that was insatiable.

The desire for meat is a symptom of a way of thinking which is not Jewish. It is a pagan expression of lust for physical gratification, a gratification which will never, can never, reach its fulfilment. This is a mindset alien to Judaism.

Maybe, this is the reason why the Torah views these bitter cries so harshly. Let us place this episode in a wider

historical context. The Jewish people are on their way to Israel, marching to the Promised Land. Now, in the midst of all of that, they desire to return to Egypt! What, in fact, are they requesting? They are requesting a reversal of the entire historical process! This parsha begs the question. How have they lost the vision of the future? What caused them to lose sight of that lofty vision? The answer is almost embarrassing. It is rather pathetic. They lost sight of the larger picture through a simple base desire. This lusting, en route to Eretz Yisrael, was a serious thing indeed.

And maybe this can explain some of the intensity of God's anger and Moshe's desperation. Maybe it is exactly the timing of this crisis that led to the volatile reaction of God and Moshe. If after the miracles of the Exodus, after Sinai, after Torah, after the Tabernacle, the people can be so drawn by a mad rush for sensual pleasure, halting the journey to the Promised Land to cry for meat, then are these people ever going to learn?

ONE STORY OR TWO?

Thus far, we have examined the meat-Manna connection. We have also proposed an explanation for Moses' disillusionment and God's fury, but we still must explain the role of the Elders in all this.

Maybe the key to understanding the central message of the story is to solve the question that we raised earlier. Is this one story or is it two distinct episodes?

When comparing the language of the two stories so neatly intertwined by the Biblical text, we note a number of words which run through both stories linking them together. A clear "connection" of this sort can be found in the following parallel usage of the word "sevivot" - around:

"He gathered seventy of the people's elders and stationed them AROUND (sevivot) the Tent." (v.24)

With the quails, God,

"strewed them over the camp, all AROUND (sevivot) the camp." (v.31)

But this is just the beginning. One word seems to appear as a central word throughout both stories. It is the verb, "ASAF" - to gather. Let us see.

- v.16 "God said to Moses, ' GATHER me seventy elders'."
- v.22 "Could all the fish in the sea be GATHERED for them to suffice them?"
- v.24 "He GATHERED seventy men of the elders of the community"
- v.30 "Moses was GATHERED into the camp he and the elders of Israel"
- v.32 "They GATHERED the quails ... even he who GATHERED least had ten 'omers'"

And this word also appears in the opening line of the parsha. The "rabble" or "mixed multitude" who first "felt a lusting" are called the "ASAFSUF" also from the same Hebrew root, "ASAF". So here we have seven uses of the same word that span both stories indiscriminately. It would seem that the Torah, by choosing common words to describe the gathering and placing of meat and the gathering and placing of elders is trying to connect the two stories and draw certain lines of

comparison.

But what comparison? How might the stories be connected?

MEAT vs. SPIRIT

If the two stories are a single narrative, then we might be able to explain the reason why they are intertwined with the following suggestion. Two other words recur over and over throughout this narrative. These are the words: "meat" and "spirit" (together, 14 times in total).

Note. The "meat" is brought to the camp by "ruach", the wind, and the spirit of God is also the "ruach". Even by the usage of this simple word pun, the Torah posits the meat craze as standing in direct opposition to God's desire for "spirit."

On a superficial level, we might suggest that the "expansion" of Moses' prophecy, his divine "spirit", is an attempt to magnify the "spirit" in the camp as a counterweight to the mad attraction to "meat".

However, at another level, this is not superficial at all. The divine connection of Moses' prophecy is contrasted by the text with the materialistic aspirations of the people. The question which is being asked in the Israelite camp is, "What will prevail, the spirit of God or the human desire for meat?" The word "assaf" : What are we "gathering"; flesh or spirit? This is the question that lies in the balance for the month that the people eat their meat.

God shows them the spiritual shallowness of their desire for meat. Even a powerful desire will die down if it is over satisfied. They will eat "an entire month until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you". The people will reach saturation point. They will eventually lose their desire.

And yet, at the same time, the prophecy of God is bestowed on seventy choice individuals. On the one hand prophecy does not offer immediate gratification. God's spirit can reach man, but only is bestowed on those who are chosen, those who are worthy. God demonstrates that His spirit is available to anyone if they will take the effort to reach the high spiritual standards demanded by the prophet. To connect with God, you must be a learned, upstanding member of the community. But when you get the prophecy, it never leaves you: "They spoke in prophecy and did not cease." (v.25) Indeed, Moses exclaims: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them all!" (v.30)

TIMING

Maybe the timing is not incidental either. Is it coincidence that this craving, this pagan lusting, this desire for Egyptian materialism is aroused just now? After all, the Israelites have just embarked upon the first leg of their journey to Canaan and to national fulfilment. Maybe some people are having second thoughts. Possibly, the people are still dithering between meat and spirit, between Egypt and Israel. Now, when they are on their way, they make a final attempt, a final expression of their indecision. (It is of interest that the next parsha talks of a delegation of spies to investigate the Promised Land. Was this an expression of the insecurities of the Israelites too?) God intercedes, reinforcing spirit over flesh, but the journey is still delayed. The Children of Israel

stand between Egypt and Israel both in their geographical location and in their psychological-religious mindset. Which is going to prevail?

Shabbat Shalom.

FOOTNOTES

[1] I see Chapters 1-8 which deal with the organisational structure of the Israelite camp as preparations for a camp and a society which is to be portable, moving to Eretz Yisrael. The verses in these chapters set up the exact locus of each group, its function in transit and in encampment and the relationships between the various elements of the Israelite camp. For more details see the shiur of Rav Menachem Liebtog on Parshat Naso.

[2] See his passionate speech at the Golden Calf episode; Exodus 32:7-14, 3

1-34. See also Numbers 13:11-20, 15:20-22.

[3] The stories are so similar that certain commentators have suggested that they are the selfsame event! See the Bechor Shor. Other parshiot are also mirrored here, eg. the Yitro visit, the appointment of judges/elders. Not surprisingly, the Biblical critics see the stories as sharing a common basis (eg. The literary Guide to the Bible. Ed. Alter and Kermode. pg. 80), but their approach has a very different theological basis to that of Rav Yosef Bechor Shor.

It is also clear that the two stories happened at exactly the same time of year/ In Shemot (16:1-4) the request for meat happens on the 15th of Iyar. Here in Bamiidbar it takes place on the 23rd of Iyar (see 10:11,33). A year later but almost to the day! Certainly food for thought (excuse the pun!). See more in note 6.

[4] For more detail on this comparison, see the articles of Nehama Leibowitz on our parsha in her "Studies in Bamidbar", especially the article "The murmurings: a repeat performance."

[5] In the previous section Moses had invited Moses to join them on their journey to Israel. His invitation is characterised by the constant repetition of the word "Tov", "good".

"We are travelling to the place of which the Lord has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be GOOD for you for the Lord has promised GOOD for Israel. ... when you come with us the GOODness that good will bestow (YETIV) on us will be GOOD for you as well." (11:29-30)

Now, in our section, we see a multiple repetition of the word "Ra" or "evil".

"The people complained, evil in the eyes of the Lord ... and in the eyes of Moses it was evil ... why have you dealt ill (HaREYota) with your servant .." (11, 10,11,15)

The good has turned to bad.

[6] It is interesting to note that the swarm of quails has been substantiated by ornithologists:

"It is well known that the quail, known to ornithologists as Coturnix coturnix, migrates in huge flocks from Europe to Central Africa in the autumn and returns in the spring. A short-tailed game bird of the pheasant family, it flies rapidly at very low altitudes. Due to the long distance involved, the migration is carried out in stages. The small quails twice each year lad exhausted on the Mediterranean shore, where they can easily be captured by hand and by nets in great quantity. Their flesh and eggs are said to be delicious, and to this day they are a prized food among the local population and are exported as a delicacy to Europe. The season of the year in which the Israelites encountered the quails fits in precisely with the bird's migratory pattern." (Nahum Sarna, Exploring Exodus pg. 119)