

Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

Parshas Behaaloscha – 5783

D. Mordechai Schlachter

There is complaining in the desert.

זָכַרְנוּ אֶת־הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר־נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם תְּנֵם אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֲבֹטְחוֹת וְאֶת־הַחֲצִיר
וְאֶת־הַבָּצְלִים וְאֶת־הַשּׁוּמִים:

“We remember the fish, that we ate in Mitzrayim for free. The cucumbers and melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.” (Bamidbar 11:5).

What does it mean they ate fish for free? Did they also eat the vegetables for free? Further, the pasuk before is about them complaining about meat. “Who of us eats meat?” (Ibid 11:4). How are cucumbers, leeks, and garlic an example of meat?

The key to these questions is when this occurred. This sedra is all over the timeline. Moshe is commanded to talk to Aharon about lighting the Menorah. (Ibid 8:2). That took place during the ordination of the Mishkan, or week one of month one of year two. Moshe is commanded to purify the Leviim. (Ibid 8:6). This took place month two of year two, with the census. (Ibid 3:44). Moshe knew about Shevat Levi’s status earlier – the first day of the first month of the second year – when he gave the gifts from the Nesiim to the houses of Gershon and Merari. (Ibid 7:7). Then the Torah clearly returns to the first days of the first month of the second year in talking about the Korban Pesach. (Ibid 9:1). Then the narrative returns to the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, returning to the narrative about the encampments and how Bnei Yisroel would travel. (Ibid 10:11). However, that is because when completing the instruction of the Mishkan the Torah ends with the Cloud of Glory resting on it by day and the pillar of fire by night. (Shmos 40:38, Bamidbar 9:15). Naturally, the narrative informs that if the Cloud of Glory moved Bnei Yisroel would travel. (Shmos 40:36, Bamidbar 15:17). Thus, it commences with their first travel from Midbar Sinai. (Bamidbar 10:11). Having completed the narrative of the Mishkan and already touching on Bnei Yisroel’s travels, the Torah ties a few loose ends together.

וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם כִּמְתַאֲנָנִים “And it was, when the nation complained.” (Ibid 11:1). At this point, the Torah does not clarify when this complaining took place or when this punishment of fire came. It is possible this is the complaints of Marah—lack of drinkable water. (Shmos 15:24). It could be the complaints by Elim and lack of bread. (Ibid 16:2). Certainly, the next pasuk about complaints fits there. The rabble complain of their desires, “who of us eats meat?” (Ibid 11:4). Then they go on to clarify their complaint and speak of the good—nonmeat—foods they ate, like fish, cucumbers, onions, and melons. (Ibid 11:5). עַתָּה נַפְשֵׁנוּ יְבֹשָׁה אֵין כֹּל בְּלִתֵּי אֶל־הֶמָּן עֵינֵינוּ: “And now our souls are all dry without having everything. Our eyes only have the manna.” (Ibid 11:6). The solution here is the quail. (Ibid 11:31). That was the solution to the request for meat earlier. (Shmos 16:13). The narrative is now finishing up the chronicle of the complaints

near Elim, and the solution of manna and the quail. It further explains what manna is. (Bamidbar 11:7-8). It also explains the desire for meat, if they came out “with flocks and cattle, and much livestock.” (Shmos 12:38). They had animals. Why ask for meat?

Moshe clarifies why eating of their own flock was not a solution. הַצֹּאֵן וּבִקְרֵי יִשְׁתַּטּוּ לָהֶם וּמִצֵּא לָהֶם אֶת כָּל-דִּגְיֵי הַיָּם יֵאָסְרוּ לָהֶם וּמִצֵּא לָהֶם: “The flock and herds will be slaughtered for them and found for them with all the fish that is in the sea, is that to be enough for them for them to find.” (Bamidbar 11:22). Their complaint for meat while they have flock shows that no matter how much cattle they have or fish they get from the sea, food is not their actual complaint. Hashem then comforts Moshe that Hashem’s power is not short, it can quell all of Bnei Yisroel’s ills. (Ibid 11:23). He does this by giving a spirit of wisdom to the seventy elders (ibid 11:25) and giving more quail than Bnei Yisroel could ever consume (ibid 11:31).

The complaint was not really about food. That is why the complaint for bread ended up as one about meat (and vegetables). It was not about meat, per say. The manna and quail are stated together in the Torah because the complaint was the same. It was their fear that as they entered the desert they were now on limited resources. In Mitzrayim they had the lushest of lands in Goshen, and plenty of livestock. They had the Nile running north right past their lands, providing fish as if free. In the desert there were no “home comforts.” They did not have the fish flowing in estuaries or rivers nearby. They did not have their own patch of land to grow their cucumber, melons, leeks, onions, or garlic. Afterall, how does quail satisfy the desire for meat? Quail is fowl, not meat. The solution to wanting meat would be a herd of buffalo running through the desert. The quail was not the answer to meat. It was the answer to feeling that Hashem would not provide in the desert.

The manna and quail are together in the Torah because they relate to each other. Regardless of whether the complaints for bread and meat were made at the same time, they were both the same complaint: what will we eat in the desert? As Moshe clarifies, “The people are 600,000-footsoldiers” and you say you will give them meat? (Ibid 11:21). Moshe was saying, how can I take care of them? They are complaining that now that they left Mitzrayim they have finite resources. How will such a large populace survive to the next destination? The solution was first the manna that came daily. Then it was the quail, an invasive species in the desert, that Hashem flew in so many that they piled up. This showed Bnei Yisroel that no matter where they were, Hashem could and would provide.

Incidentally, the Torah also mentions how Hashem aided Moshe with the seventy elders. (Ibid 11:25). That is why the narrative again returns to Yisro who met them in the desert on the way to Har Sinai. (Shmos 18:5). The narrative here does not say Yisro left. After discussing whether he should stay, Moshe sends him away in peace. (Ibid 18:27). Thereby, the Torah ties up a few loose ends before moving forward with the incident of Moshe and his siblings.