

The Torah Portions They Never Told Us About
Meat and Spirit
Melton Geshet at JCC, December 3, 2012
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- A) Numbers chapter 11, verses 4 – 35
- 1) Verse 4 – The riffraff is the mixed multitude of non Israelites that left Egypt on their coattails.
 - 2) Verse 4 – The riffraff succeeds in infecting the Israelites with their despondency. We are often easily influenced by our environment.
 - 3) Verse 4 – Is it really true that they had no meat to eat?
 - a) Shmot chapter 12, verses 37 – 38 – They had much meat, and it is very unlikely that it was all consumed by this time.
 - b) Shmot chapter 16, verse 13 – They were given quail to eat, although this could have a onetime occurrence?
 - c) Bmidbar chapter 9, verses 1 – 5 – They had the sheep necessary to offer the Kurban Pesach, so why do they say that they have no meat?
 - 4) Verses 5 – 6 – What does it mean that they say that they had ‘free’ food in Egypt?
 - 5) Verses 6 – 9 – This is the manna that has been falling since they left Egypt.
 - 6) Verses 7 – 9 – A parenthetical statement: What is it here for?
 - 7) Verse 10 – “Every clan apart” means to emphasize the universality of the weeping.
 - 8) Verse 10 – “At the entrance of his tent” means openly and defiantly.
 - 9) Verse 10 – 15 – Just as the people were infected by the riffraff, so is Moshe infected by the people.
 - 10) Verses 13 – Why is Moshe so distraught and so certain that nothing can be done? Could it be so hard for God to provide meat?
 - 11) Verse 16 – This is the source of the number of the men of the Sanhedrin
 - 12) Verses 16 – 17 – God will demonstrate that He still speaks directly exclusively to Moshe, but at the same time will inspire the others.
 - 13) Verses 16 – 17 – If the whole problem is meat, it is not clear how adding additional leaders is going to help. Are they going to provide the meat?
 - 14) Verses 18 – 20 – Why does God interpret their desire for meat as a rejection of Him and of the Exodus?
 - 15) Verses 18 – 20 – If what they want is meat, then how is providing meat for a month long period going to help? What will happen when the month is over?
 - 16) Verses 21 – 23 – How could Moshe doubt God’s ability to provide meat?
 - 17) Verse 24 – Moshe reports to the people God’s statement that meat will be provided.
 - 18) Verses 24 – 25 – The chosen men are inspired by God.
 - 19) Verse 26 - “Recorded” means either means that they are among the generally recognized elders but were not among the 70 selected, or that they were among the 70 selected but out of modesty refused the appointment
 - 20) Verse 29 – Indicative of the tremendous humility of Moshe. He wants only the best for the people, that God’s spirit be upon as many as possible.
 - 21) Verses 31 – The word wind is the same word for spirit.
- B) Summary of the questions
- 1) There was meat, so why do they complain that they have no meat?
 - 2) What is the meaning of ‘free’ food?
 - 3) Why the explanation about the manna included here?
 - 4) Why is Moshe so sure that nothing can be done?
 - 5) How are 70 elders going to help?
 - 6) Why does God say that the people have rejected Him?
 - 7) How is providing meat only for a month going to help?
- C) Explanation

1) The words meat בשר and spirit/wind רוח appear 8 and 6 times respectively, all told 14 times, which is of course a key number. The point of the whole story is that what appears to be a problem of meat is really a problem of spirit. The problem is not in their material circumstances and no so called improvement of their material will help. The problem is in their minds and hearts; their whole orientation to life must be transformed. They must learn to outgrow psychological slavery and become responsible human beings. They must learn self control and self restraint and how to uplift the life of the body and make it holy.

2) Rashi on Bmidbar chapter 11, verse 5, from the Sifrei section 87

“Could we imagine that in Egypt they were given fish for free? Behold it says in Shmot 5:18 “Straw will not be given to you”. If they were not given straw, could they have been given fish for free? So what does it mean ‘free’? Free of the mitzvot!”

3) Vayikra chapter 17, verses 1 – 6, 13 – They had great quantities of meat available to them but it had to be eaten within the framework of a sacrifice in the Tabernacle. There were rules and regulations. The meat could not be slaughtered in any way one wanted and could not be slaughtered anywhere. And parts of it had to be put upon the altar. But the people wanted to eat without restrictions. They did not want their animalistic urges impinged upon. They chafed against the responsibilities that freedom imposed upon them. They longed to go back to the freedom of slavery.

a) Furthermore, when the journey into the wilderness of the desert began very recently, the Tabernacle was packed up and that meant that temporarily meat could not be eaten at all, even though it was widely available. This certainly angered and confused the people.

4) Shmot chapter 16, verses 4 - 5, 14 – 30; Devarim chapter 8, verses 2 – 3, 5, 16 – The manna was available and there was certainly enough, but the people felt psychologically tortured by the rules and regulations surrounding its consumption. They wanted to see to their own lives and to their bodily needs in totally freedom, without any rules or restrictions.

a) Our chapter in Bmidbar describes the failure of the people in the test described in Devarim.

5) Answers to all the questions

a) The complaint was not that they had no meat, but that they had no free meat. They felt that they could not enjoy their meat because of the rules surrounding its consumption.

b) The parenthetical explanation about the manna is to show that they had food aplenty and it was tasty enough. That was not their real problem.

c) Moshe was sure that nothing could be done because what the people wanted was the exact opposite of what God wanted for them.

d) The elders are appointed as educators who will help Moshe to enhance the moral understanding of the people and to slowly elevate them spiritually.

e) God’s says that the people have rejected him because they are rebelling against the very lesson that He wishes to teach them.

f) The meat provided was not to answer their needs but rather as a punishment, to make it clear to them that meat is not what they need. Since it was fowl and not meat per se, it need not be brought to the Tabernacle to be consumed. It was relatively ‘free’, and the people were taught by the plague that unbridled consumption of it brought, that such unbridled freedom is no blessing.

D) The take away

1) The lesson is that the Exodus from slavery to freedom was not meant to create a situation of the type of freedom in which anything goes. Man is not free to make an animal of himself and to live without moral responsibility. Freedom is the ability to learn to accept a higher responsibility to live according to a divine ethic that sublimated animals needs to higher ideals.

2) Abraham Joshua Heschel, God in Search of Man (Harper and Row, 1966), pages 409-412

“Man lives in bondage to his natural environment, to society, and to his own character; he is enslaved to needs, interests, and selfish desires...”

To believe in freedom is ... to maintain that man is able to escape the bonds of the processes in which he is involved and to act in a way that is not necessitated by

antecedent factors. Freedom is the state of going out of the self, an act of spiritual ecstasy, in the original sense of the term.

Man's ability to transcend the self, to rise above the natural ties and bonds, presupposes...his belonging to a dimension that is higher than nature, society, and the self, and accepts the reality of such a dimension beyond the natural order. It means the power to live spiritually, to rise to a higher level of existence.

...The possibility of living spiritually depends upon the idea of creation and man's being more than the product of nature. The ultimate concept in Greek philosophy is the idea of cosmos, of order; the first teaching in the Bible is the idea of creation. Translated into eternal principles, cosmos means fate, while creation means freedom.... The essential meaning of creation is, as Maimonides explained, the idea that the universe did not come about by necessity but as a result of freedom."

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Insecurity of Freedom* (Schocken Books, 1964), p. 15

"The meaning of freedom presupposes an openness to transcendence, and man has to be responsive... Free is he who decides to act in agreement with the spirit that goes beyond all necessities"

- 3) Paradoxically, one who acts contrary to his perceived nature, is the only one who is truly free. Freedom is exercised by liberating oneself from the dictates of his needs and desires and aspirations, for all these are not really his. He must deny and repress that which seemingly appears to be himself, for that putative self is truly an imposter. A person must redeem himself from bondage to the natural forces which surround him and penetrate him. This redemption can only be accomplished through attaching oneself to that which is beyond all of these deterministic natural forces – God. One attaches himself to God through the bridge of *Torah* and *Mitzvot*, the manifestations of God's will here on earth. Through clinging to God's will, the only really free will that there is, can one himself live freely. The acceptance of the yoke of the kingdom of heaven, however difficult – actually precisely because of the difficulty – is freedom itself.