

“Who Will Give Us Meat?”

Parshat B'haalotekha

Our ancestors, hungry in the desert, ask, (11:4) "Who will give us meat?" (Remember the famous ad campaign, "Where's the beef?") Many of the commentaries question the question itself. After all, the Jewish people had plenty of beef right in their desert back yard. Exodus 12:38 tells us that the Jewish people left Egypt with "flocks and herds, even very much cattle." So why the kvetch about meat when they had it so close to home?

Rashi suggests that the entire complaint was "alilah," an accusation or pretext to make trouble. In Rashi's eyes, they needed an excuse to go back to Egypt. Another commentary (Baal Haturim) proposes that they wanted to go to Israel and occupy it immediately, without a patient period of waiting and settlement. Land can be viewed as symbolizing wealth. Either way, the complaint can be seen an exercise in immediate self-gratification, for which eating meat is the symbol. In essence the complaint meant, "We want meat, we want land, and we want it now!" As Rav Soloveitchik once explained, there was an element of semi-paganism in this desire for self-indulgence, for they worshipped only what they wanted. This interpretation of lustful desire is proved by another comment of Rashi on Verse 10, "Moses heard the people crying by their families." There, Rashi comments that their cries were "On family matters, on sexual relationships forbidden to them." As the story continues to unfold toward its conclusion, God gives them meat, but not the meat from their back yards, rather from flocks of quail. They eat, but then suffer from their indulgence through illness and death. They pay a heavy penalty for their desire for immediate gratification.

The issues of this chapter are strikingly similar to those in our own society. We live in time when so many people "want the beef" - sensual pleasure, wealth, self-gratification. People want it all and they want it now! As yet another ad, this one for a diet plan, once put it, "Total indulgence, zero guilt!!" This has been true in our society in so many ways - economically, as well as in lifestyle. When there are no limits, no guidelines, everyone lusts after meat and anything goes.

The Torah tells us that we are to enjoy life. God wants us to have pleasure within the context of a healthy outlook and moral guidelines. Meat can be good, but we are to enjoy it with a sense of patience and effort, as the Kosher laws and the blessings before food teach us. The Torah allows us to make money, teaching that material blessings are not bad. But they are also not goals by themselves. Rather, they are a way to serve God and a means of sharing with those less fortunate. Sexuality is also a gift from God. We are to enjoy it with discretion, modesty, humility, and sanctity. Within Judaism, there is wide latitude for individual rights and private behavior, but not for "anything goes."

As for the diet plan that promised, "Total indulgence, zero guilt," Consumer Reports a while ago wrote that none of the diet plans really work unless the participant has discipline, the right food and exercise. But then again, if you have these things, you do not really need to shell out money for a diet plan. You can do it on your own; it is in your own backyard. The Torah is suggesting a little less indulgence and a little more healthy guilt. Discipline, the right guidelines, and moral exercise truly work. As our Torah commentaries taught so well, you can't have it all right now. But if you look in your own backyard and have patience, effort and moral guidance, you can have a lot of it and enjoy it much more.

Shabbat Shalom!
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