

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Beha'alotcha

In Parshat Beha'alotcha, the complaints begin. From murmurings all the way to an outright uprising, the core parshiot of the book of Bamidbar demonstrate how an intimate relationship with G-d can fade away.

We know that lost faith is all too common in modern times, but how did it happen to the Jews of the Desert Generation? They witnessed the miracles of the Exodus and the splitting of the Red Sea; they heard the voice of G-d at Sinai. How could they possibly want to distance themselves from G-d? He was miraculously sustaining them every step of their journey across the uninhabitable desert. What were they complaining about?

One comment of the Jews in this week's parsha is particularly obnoxious and practically inexplicable. "We remember the free fish that we ate in Egypt ... And now our spirits are dried up. There is nothing but this manna before our eyes!" (Bamidbar 10:5,6). Fish?! Fond memories of Egyptian fish?! What about the oppression, the murder of their children, the slave-labor? Did they forget about that? And what's wrong with manna? How could anyone prefer fish over heavenly manna?

It gets even stranger. These fish were no ordinary fish. "When the Jews would draw water from the wells in Egypt, G-d would put small fish in their buckets" (Yoma 75a). Free fish as a divine gift for the hungry Jewish slaves. What was it about these fish that the Jews missed so much? Obviously, the issue here is not really about a preference for fish. There is something much deeper going on.

When Yaakov was on the road down to Egypt, G-d made him a promise, "Do not be afraid ... I will go to Egypt with you" (Beraishit 46:3,4). G-d kept His promise. The small fish that the Jew would find in his bucket was a subtle reminder that, no matter how hopeless life in Egypt seemed, G-d was with them. Just when the Jew was convinced that G-d must have forgotten his plight, G-d gave him a sign of hope. I am with you in your suffering. I will never abandon you.

This is a recurring theme in the Torah. When Yosef's brothers kidnapped him and sold him as a slave, G-d gave Yosef a sign. The brothers sold him to Arab merchants who threw Yosef into a caravan transporting fragrant gum, balsam, and resin (Beraishit 37:25). Here is Yosef at the lowest point of his life, headed for Egypt as a slave, but yet, G-d arranged matters so that he should have a pleasant and aromatic trip. It's almost comical. Undoubtedly, Yosef was consoled by this unexpected twist: I may not understand why any of this is happening to me, he thought, but at least I can see the Hand of G-d.



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

This is the kind of relationship that we have with G-d today. Ever since the destruction of the Temple, we are in exile, but G-d has come into exile with us. He conceals His presence, directing events from behind the scenes. If we keep our eyes open, however, we can sometimes see through the so called “coincidences” of life and discern G-d’s loving influence. G-d is always sending us signs. All we need to do is pay attention and Divine Providence will come into focus.

This is the reality of life in exile, whether it’s the exile of modern times or the exile of Egypt. Once the Jews left Egypt, however, they entered into a very different reality. They were thrust into a life of miracles, and their survival in the desert depended on it.

Unfortunately, some Jews were quite comfortable with their old relationship with G-d, and they were unwilling to develop the relationship any further. They lacked the courage to make the transition from the relationship of exile into the deeper relationship of redemption. Our parsha vividly describes how G-d escorted the Jews through the desert, His Presence represented by a protective cloud in the daytime and a fire at night. The Jews were living in the constant Presence of G-d (Bamidbar 9:15-16). Life with G-d revealed is the most exalted life man can live, but at the same time, feeling G-d’s eyes upon you 24/7 does put on a certain pressure. In the bright light of G-d’s Presence, you are keenly aware of the responsibility to live life seriously. Some Jews refused to live up to the standard that such a life demands. In their mind, G-d was getting too close for comfort. They preferred the hidden divine providence of fish in the bucket over the outright miracle of manna in the desert.

Life in exile affords us the option of keeping G-d at arm’s length. We are free to ignore Him whenever we so choose, and welcome Him back into our lives at our convenience. This sorry state of affairs challenges us with an unsettling question: Are we satisfied with the status quo? Or do we yearn for a more intimate relationship with G-d? The tragedy is, our life in exile has been so long and bitter, we hardly remember what we’re missing.

May we once again experience the sublime pleasure of living in a world where G-d does not hide His Presence.

Shabbat Shalom!

