

Behaaloscha

Breastfeeding

We remember the fish that we could eat in Egypt at no cost, along with the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. Now our spirits are dried up, with nothing but the man before our eyes.

Bamidbar 11:5–6

The Jewish people suddenly “desired a [great] desire”⁶³⁴ to eat more than just the heavenly food, the *man*. They remembered other foods – cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. Surely there were other foods that they ate in Egypt, but they missed only these. Our Sages⁶³⁵ tell us that the *man* could taste like every single food in the world...with several exceptions. Foods that are not good for nursing mothers to eat could not be tasted in the *man*. The theme of nursing mothers and children comes up again just after the Jewish people make this complaint. Moshe, who seems to have had it with the Jewish people, turns to Hashem and says,⁶³⁶ “Was I the woman who was pregnant with this nation? Did I give birth to them? But you told me that I must carry them in my bosom as a nursing woman carries an infant...”

The *man* was like mother’s milk for the Jewish people. Even the taste of the *man* is described by the Torah as *leshad*,⁶³⁷ which our Sages⁶³⁸ explain is related to the word *shodayim*, breasts, and is hinting to the taste of breast milk. It was a food that came from Heaven, one that they didn’t have to work for. And, explains the Sfas Emes,⁶³⁹ the Jewish people decided that they’d had just about enough of this desert lifestyle. The Torah says that the Jewish people “desired a desire,” which could also be rendered “desired to have desires.” The Jewish people felt that they were ready to begin living at the level where they could be tested with physical temptation. This was just days before they were to enter the land of Israel, where they would, in fact, be tempted in just that way. They would have to work their fields, tend their vineyards and earn their own keep. No more were they going to be able to sit in the desert and be taught Torah, with their every need taken care

634 Bamidbar 11:4

635 Yoma 75a; Sifri quoted in Rashi 11:5, s.v. *es bakishuim*. See also *Sifri Dvei Rav* of R. David Pardo there. See also *Maharsha* to Bava Metzia 86b (s.v. *omar*) regarding the fact that according to the Talmud, the *man* was given to the Jews in the merit of the milk that Avraham gave his guests, rather than the bread that he prepared for them, for *man* is also compared to bread. [The Midrash (Bereishis Rabbah 48:18, Shemos Rabbah 55:5), in fact, makes this comparison.] He explains that the Talmud sees the essence of the *man* as breastmilk, as the Gemara in Yoma explains.

636 Bamidbar 11:12

637 Bamidbar 11:8

638 Yoma and Sifri, *ibid*. See also Rashi 11:8, s.v. *leshad*.

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of for them by Hashem. They felt they were ready for that next step. But they were early, and Hashem was not pleased at all.

The *man* was the mother's milk that the Jewish people were meant to drink. "Your two breasts – these are Moshe and Aharon," says the Midrash.⁶⁴⁰ Moshe and Aharon were feeding the Jewish people, spiritually taking care of them to ready them for their lives in the world, where they could go out and eat meat and all sorts of other foods. Everything that the infant needs can be found in his mother's milk – but the Jews were tired of being fed.

However, it would seem that they learned from Hashem's anger at them, for when they were offered the chance to enter the Land of Israel, they declined, in favor of staying in the desert! This would seem to be the correct response; after all, Hashem clearly was unhappy with their wanting to enter the paradigm of challenge. Wouldn't it be better, thought the Jewish people, to stay in the desert and eat *man* rather than have to move into the more challenging world of the Land of Israel? Isn't this what Hashem made clear that He really wants from us? And yet, this was one of the gravest sins in our history as a people. So, what are we then to do? Are we to remain in our deserts, avoiding contact with the outside world and maintaining our pristine Torah lives, or are we to rush out into them, despite the risks that we will face?

And then, some Jewish people, the *maafilim*, decided that choosing not to go into the Land of Israel had been a most grievous error, which, of course, it was. So they picked themselves up and went to fight the nations and make their way in to the Land of Israel themselves. But this did not work out, as Moshe warned them that it would not.⁶⁴¹ How confusing! It almost seems that there is no way at all to win, doesn't it?

For two and one half years, the schools of Hillel and Shammai debated whether or not each of us would have been better off never having been created. At the end of that time, they decided, by vote, that it would have been better for man not to have been created, for there is enormous risk in this life! One can make such grievous, devastating mistakes that he gives up his share in eternity! And they concluded, "Now that he *has* been created, let him make certain that he is free of any sin."⁶⁴² It's a funny sort of argument. What practical conclusion can come from knowing whether or not we would have been better off if something had or had not happened? And two and one half years of talk about it – is that reasonable?

All this becomes clear with a story. In a small European shtetl, the local shochet (ritual slaughterer) once approached the Rabbi and asked him to find him a replacement. After working for so many years, the shochet suddenly wanted out! "But why?" wondered the Rabbi. The shochet explained, "I have come to realize

640 Shir Hashirim Rabbah 4:5

641 Bamidbar 14:41. See also *Tzidkas Hatzaddik* 46

642 Eruvin 13b

that my job is just too risky. If I slaughter an animal and make even a tiny mistake, our entire town can be eating non-kosher meat due to me. I just cannot handle that sort of pressure.” The Rabbi was impressed with the sincere piety of this man, but after thinking for a moment, he turned to the shochet and said, “You are right; it is frightening. But who would you have me appoint to replace you, someone who is *not* frightened? Your chief qualification for the job is how concerned you are that things turn out alright! You cannot quit!”⁶⁴³

Every morning, we ask Hashem, “Do not bring us to challenges.”⁶⁴⁴ Even though we are only in this world to stand up to its challenges, we nevertheless want to avoid them. The married man who just relishes the opportunity to be tempted to violate his marriage, confident that he will stand up to those challenges, has a far greater chance of slipping up than a person who is so committed to his relationship that he avoids even being challenged. The chief qualification for engaging in this world – for going out into the place of challenge – is that one does not want to be there. A baby who is more than excited to finish with this whole nursing thing and jump out into a world that he is not really developed enough to face is doomed to fail.

The great Marcus Aurelius Antoninus told Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi⁶⁴⁵ that if a person had a *yetzer hara* in his mother’s womb, it would cause him to beat his way out of the womb before he was developed enough to manage in this world. Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi agreed with these words, and praised them greatly. The negative impulses that we have often manifest in the part of our psyche that pushes us out into challenges and tells us, “You can handle it,” when really we are not as developed as we think we are.

The Jewish people, when they were too excited to jump into a world of challenge, to get “out of the Yeshiva” that they were living in called the *midbar* – the desert – were wrong for that request. But when they got to the Land of Israel, and appreciated the enormity of the challenge facing them to the point of being frightened, that is just when they were expected to go in and take on the challenge. Getting clear that this world is a frightening place is important – even if it takes two and a half years! We can beat our challenges only *because* we are impressed with how imposing they are. The firefighter must know that fire is truly dangerous – only then can he successfully battle it, and go in and out of it to save the lives of others.

643 See the Introduction of *Shaalos Uteshuvos Rabbi Akiva Eiger Miksav Yado* (page 16), where he describes how he prayed a great deal that he be able to leave the Rabbinate, and writes, “I have expressed many times to my dear friend Rav Yisrael Wreschner and to my son Avraham that if I had my way, I would choose to be a *shamash* [sexton] in the synagogue or a night watchman, and learn Torah the majority of the day.

644 Morning Blessings. See also Sanhedrin 107a, and Maharal, ad loc., about how David asked for a test, and therefore failed, for one is not meant to ask for tests – the highest level is to avoid those tests, and pray to not have to face them. He who does so will, in fact, emerge successful from his tests, if and when he is faced with them.

645 Sanhedrin 91b

All people live their own life. One person may need more time in his mother's womb or his Yeshiva than another, to develop before going out to work the land. There is no single number that is right for everyone. But when one kicks his way out of the womb early, that is a very dangerous thing. There is a time to be fed by Moshe and Aaron, and a time to be weaned. But one must always have the desire to be free of worry and challenges, wishing that he could just sit and study the Torah. "The wise men and prophets did not desire the coming of the Moshiach so that they could rule the world...rather, it was so that they could be undisturbed and study the Torah and its wisdom..." The messianic era is a time when there is no longer much challenge. Even though we were put here for challenge, to stand up to those challenges, we long to be free of the struggle so that we can just sit and drink from the Torah of Moshe and Aaron. Let us pray that this will be soon – in our times. We have struggled long enough.