BS”D

Parshas Beha’alosecha

The Burial Place of Craving

In this week’s Parsha, we read about the Jewish people complaining about the lack of “real food” in the desert. There were dissatisfied with the manna, the “bread from heaven” that G-d supplied them with. They wanted meat! They fondly remembered the fish and the vegetables they had eaten in Egypt.

The people wept with frustration. The Torah tells us that “G-d was very angry and [their conduct] was bad in the eyes of Moshe.”

Moshe complained to G-d. He could not handle the burden of the Jewish people. He was in a position of carrying them “as a nursemaid carries an infant.” How was he supposed to get the people meat? How was he to take care of all of the people by himself? Finally, Moshe concludes, “If this is what you do to me, I ask you to kill me so that I need no longer see my evil predicament.”

This complaint of Moshe, especially the concluding sentence, seems out of character. Moshe, the humble, Moshe, the defender of the Jewish people, Moshe of whom G-d says (later in this very Parsha), “I speak with him mouth to mouth,” Moshe of whom G-d says, “He is trusted throughout my House.” This Moshe is now seemingly whining that he can’t take it and G-d should kill him? Surely, there’s more than meets the eye here.

I’d like to pose another question. G-d says to Moshe that He will give the people meat, not for one day, not for two, nor five or ten or twenty. He’ll provide meat for thirty days. He’ll provide meat until it comes out of their nostrils, until it becomes loathsome to them.

G-d keeps His promise. But He goes further. As the Israelites eat the meat, G-d’s anger strikes out at them. A great plague breaks out and many die.

This seems unfair. The Jews ask for meat. G-d obliges and gives it to them. Then He kills many of them? It seems mean-spirited and unfair as Rashi quotes Moshe as saying to G-d, “Is it fair to feed a donkey oats and then chop off its head?”

Let’s return to our first question. Why is Moshe asking G-d to kill him? The Sforno suggests the following: Moshe feels he is incapable of leading the Israelites anymore. He thinks a new leader or leaders should be chosen. But he fears that G-d will not appoint a new leader since that would be a rejection of Moshe. So Moshe says in effect, “Please, Hashem, the Jews need a new leader. If my presence stops that from happening, I ask you to allow me to die. Thus you will be free to choose someone better than me.” Moshe is not whining. He is saying he is willing to step aside even if it means dying for the benefit of the Jewish people.

The Malbim takes a different approach. Moshe is a man on an exalted spiritual plane. He feels that being who he is he cannot “descend” to the ordinary world and provide the gluttonous people with meat. Only if G-d took away Moshe’s spiritual level, would he be able to provide the people with their needs. So he says to G-d, “I am not on the level and the plane of the people. I don’t want to stop being who I am and become a coarser, more earthy person. Please G-d, take my life. I’d rather die than be forced to come down to a lower level, a lower level of apprehension of life and of G-d. Spare me that pain, and take my life instead.”

Rashi ‘s interpretation perhaps answers my original question best. Moshe is not complaining about his hard job. Rashi explains that Moshe has been shown the punishment that G-d will mete out to the Jews. He is not saying as the standard translation says, I need not see *my* evil predicament. Rather, Moshe actually means I don’t want to see the evil that will befall *them*. I cannot life if the Jewish people are harshly punished. Moshe is expressing, not his frustration, but his love of the Jewish people.

And yet, even though G-d appoints seventy elders to help Moshe, He does punish the Israelites. But it is not an act of anger or pettiness. It is rather a most necessary lesson that the people must be taught.

The Akeidas Yitzchok explains that the B’nei Yisroel were really not particularly interested in getting better food. They were attempting to throw off the yoke of Torah and Mitzvos. They preferred the freedom from moral responsibility that they had in Egypt where their bodies were enslaved but where they did not have the “burden” of Torah. Their complaint about the food was just a pretext; they were really complaining about having to do Torah and Mitzvos.

I would add another slightly different view to the Akeidas Yitzchok. Indeed, the Jews were complaining about what they perceived as a burden. But maybe they *did* really want the meat. If life is not about responsibility and obligations to a higher ideal, then perhaps what it’s about is getting as much pleasure as you can. “We want meat” really means we want to enjoy life as much as possible. After all, what else is there to life?

Hashem had to teach the Bnei Yisroel a painful but critically important lesson. You’ll get the pleasure that you asked for. You’ll get even more. And more. You’ll get to the point that pleasure disgusts you. You’ll get to the point that it actually destroys you.

A life without a higher purpose is a wasted life. Living for a higher purpose does demand discipline and hard work. But it is satisfying. Living for yourself, for the pleasure of the moment, is disastrous. Self-centeredness ultimately leads to self-loathing. It leads to the death of your soul and perhaps of your body.

The Jews learned that lesson. They buried their dead in a place they named “Kivros HaTa’avah,” which means the burial place of those who craved.

Perhaps we can translate Kivros HaTa’avah as “the burial place of craving.” Only if you bury once and for all a world view of “craving,” of living life to take, take, take, enjoy, enjoy, enjoy, can you begin to live a real life, a life of purpose and of meaning.