

Introductory humor: Bush and Moses

Recently, while going through an airport during one of his many trips, President Bush encountered a man with long hair, wearing a white robe and sandals, holding a staff.

President Bush approached the man and said, "Aren't you Moses?" The man didn't answer, but just kept staring straight ahead.

Again the President said, "Moses!" in a loud voice. The man just kept staring ahead, never answering the president.

Soon a secret service agent came along and President Bush grabbed him and said, "Doesn't this man look like Moses to you?"

The secret service agent agreed with the President. "Well," said the President, "Every time I say his name, he just keeps staring ahead and refuses to speak. Watch!" Again, the President yelled, "Moses!" and again the man stared straight ahead.

Finally, the secret service man went up to the man in the white robe and whispered, "You look just like Moses. Are you Moses?"

The man leaned over and whispered, "Yes, I am Moses. But the last time I talked to a bush, I spent 40 years wandering in the desert!"ⁱ

Why isn't enough enough? Why must the Israelites complain so much during their travels?

In today's *Parasha* we read

יא:א וַיְהִי הָעַם כְּמִתְאַנְנִים רַע בְּאַזְנֵי ה' וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' וַיַּחַר אַפּוֹ וַתִּבְעַר-בָּם אֵשׁ ה'
וַתֹּאכַל בְּקֶצֶה הַמַּחֲנֶה: ב וַיִּצְעַק הָעַם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל מֹשֶׁה אֶל-ה' וַתִּשְׁקַע
הָאֵשׁ:

The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord. The Lord heard and was incensed; a fire of the Lord broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the Lord and the fire died down.ⁱⁱ

“Yes, but what have you done for me lately?” This seems to be the refrain of the Israelites. “Okay, we had fun at Sinai, and we saw amazing things and were overcome by emotion, so we said ‘*Everything God says, we will DO and we will LISTEN!*’ But now, we’re hungry, and we’re tired of traveling and we can’t stand this *Manna*.”

And what happens next?

ד והאספסוף אשר בקרבם התאוה וישבו ויבכו גם בני ישראל ויאמרו מי יאכלנו בשר: ה זכרנו את-הדגה אשר-נאכל במצרים חנם את הקשאים ואת האבטחים ואת-החציר ואת-הבצלים ואת-השומים:

The riffraff (the ערוב רב that came out with them from Egypt) in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions and the garlic.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is incredible! What is wrong with this picture?

[Ask for congregational input here.](#)

And of course, Moses, never one to be upstaged in the drama department gives God his usual response, “If this is the way it is, and I’ve found favor in your eyes, kill me now!” (after v. 15) And after all, isn’t this the lament of so many disappointed Jewish mothers?

And what happens next? After a spirit of prophesy comes over the camp, God responds to their demand for meat. And here we find one of my favorite sayings in the Torah:

יח וְאֶל-הָעָם תֹּאמַר הַתְּקַדְּשׁוּ לַמָּחָר וְאֲכַלְתֶּם בָּשָׂר כִּי בִכִּיתֶם בְּאֲזְנֵי ה' לֵאמֹר מִי יֵאָכְלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר כִּי-טוֹב לָנוּ בְּמִצְרַיִם וְנָתַן יְהוָה לָכֶם בָּשָׂר וְאֲכַלְתֶּם: יט לֹא יוֹם אֶחָד תֹּאכְלוּן וְלֹא יוֹמִים וְלֹא חֲמֵשָׁה יָמִים וְלֹא עֶשְׂרֵה יָמִים וְלֹא עֶשְׂרִים יוֹם: כ עַד חֹדֶשׁ יָמִים **עַד אֲשֶׁר-יֵצֵא מֵאַפְכֶם** וְהָיָה לָכֶם לְזָרָא יַעַן כִּי-מָאַסְתֶּם אֶת-ה' אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבְּכֶם וַתִּבְכּוּ לִפְנֵי לַמָּה זֶה יֵצְאוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם:

And say to the people: Purify yourselves for tomorrow and you shall eat meat, for you have kept whining before the Lord and saying. 'If only we had meat to eat! Indeed, we were better off in Egypt! The Lord will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, **until it comes out of your nostrils** and becomes loathsome to you. For you have rejected the Lord who is among you, by whining before Him and saying 'Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!'^{iv}

I will give you meat until it comes out of your nostrils! Unable to hear God's sarcasm, when the quail came in, the people ate greedily, gathering up huge amounts; far more than they could possibly eat.

And what was God's response?

לב וַיִּקָּם הָעָם כָּל-הַיּוֹם הַהוּא וְכָל-הַלַּיְלָה וְכָל יוֹם הַמָּחָרָת וַיֹּאסְפוּ אֶת-הַשְּׂלֹו הַמִּמְעִיט אֲסַף עֶשְׂרֵה חֲמֵרִים וַיִּשְׁטְחוּ לָהֶם שְׂטוֹחַ סְבִיבוֹת הַמַּחֲנֶה: לג הַבָּשָׂר עוֹדְנוּ בֵּין שְׁנֵיהֶם טָרֵם יִכְרַת וְאִף ה' חָרָה בָּעָם וַיָּךְ ה' בָּעָם מַכָּה רַבָּה מְאֹד: לד וַיִּקְרָא אֶת-שֵׁם-הַמְּקוֹם הַהוּא קִבְרוֹת הַתְּאוּהָ כִּי-שָׁם קִבְּרוּ אֶת-הָעָם הַמִּתְאוּיִם:

The people set to gathering quail all that day and night and all the next – even he who gathered least had ten *homers* (a *homer* is roughly 400 liters) – and they spread them out all around the camp. The meat was still between their teeth, not yet chewed, when the anger of the Lord blazed forth against the people and the Lord struck the people with a very severe plague. That place was named *Kibroth – Hattaavah*, because the people who had the craving were buried there.

They were so gluttonous that God struck them with a plague. The place was named for them *Kibroth – Hattaavah* – the burial place for those with craving.

So, what are we to make of this whole scene? What are the Israelites really saying? Is this really about meat?

Ask for congregational input [here](#).

Of course the rabbis are troubled by this. On the lament for free fish in Egypt, Rashi reads into this, as quoted from Midrash Sifrei, “they had free fish in Egypt!? The Egyptians wouldn’t give them straw to make the bricks, yet they would give them free fish?!” The amazement at the *chutzpa* of these people comes out loud and clear in the Midrash’s comment here.

And they remember all the vegetables as well as the fish. But wasn’t their lament about meat? So where do we go with this?

The Israelites couldn’t allow themselves to remember the traumatic conditions in Egypt. The death proclamation over all the male children.

The backbreaking labor. The harsh taskmasters. So they remembered an idealized version of Egypt as having been a place of bounty.

They've been travelling for a year now, and clearly they don't have the emotional maturity to handle their new freedom, let alone the physical realities it brings.

The fact is that the Israelites still had their slave mentality; it was loud and clear. When things were going well in the travels, they were okay with it – they had just exchanged one taskmaster for another. But things didn't go well all the time.

The Israelites had a new burden to deal with now as well. Torah. They were given Torah at Sinai and agreed to accept all the precepts of Torah. So when they say they remember the free fish in Egypt, Rashi continues in his comment by saying that the fish they got in Egypt did not have the strings of the *Mitzvot*, the precepts of Torah, attached to their food. The reality was sinking in that their life was going to be completely different now; they were free of Egyptian bonds, but they had a new yoke, one they willingly accepted, the yoke of Torah.

These complaints weren't about the specifics of the food they were getting. They were about reality biting them, and they didn't like what they had gotten themselves into.

This is a common complaint today too. Many Jews don't want the burden of Torah, so they become secular, or assimilate, or become apostate. Those that do remain Jews drift to Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism, where Torah is more of an option than an obligation.

Thus, we have a huge burden to save Jewry in America. The roles of Conservative Judaism are shrinking. While some of it is budgetary; the discontent of paying movement dues when seeming to get little from the Movement; much of it is ideological. If you choose to be observant, it's hard to live in the Conservative world, so many become Orthodox, and others become liberal. Being a Conservative Jew is probably the hardest identity of Jewish America. We have Torah obligations and accept them, yet at the same time, we question the tradition of revelation of Torah. "Tradition and Change", a mantra of Conservative Judaism, can be hard to grasp at times.

So, what do we, as affiliated Conservative Jews, need to do with this? I think the answer is clear; we need to learn more about Judaism in general, and Conservative Judaism, in specific. This way, we can do this with our eyes wide open, rather than in a fog of PTSD as we came out of Egypt.

Shabbat Shalom.

ⁱ <http://www.israelnationalnews.com/Articles/Article.aspx/3804#.T8zzEtVYsTg>

ⁱⁱ *Humash Etz Hayim*. New York: RA/UCSJ/JPS. 2001. P. 827

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* Pp. 827-8

^{iv} *Ibid.* p. 830