



DVAR TZEDEK TEXT STUDY

Parashat Beha'alotcha 5773

May 25, 2013

This week's Dvar Tzedek takes the form of an interactive text study. We hope that you'll use this text study to actively engage with the *parashah* and contemporary global justice issues.

Consider using this text study in any of the following ways:

- Learn collectively. Discuss it with friends, family or colleagues. Discuss it at your Shabbat table.
- Enrich your own learning. Read it as you would a regular Dvar Tzedek and reflect on the questions it raises.
- Teach. Use the ideas and reactions it sparks in you as the basis for your own *dvar* Torah.

Please take two minutes to share your thoughts on this piece by completing this [feedback form](#).

Introduction

Parashat Beha'alotcha contains one of the many episodes of grumbling during the Israelites' journey through the desert. Lamenting their limited diet of manna, they nostalgically remember the variety of food they ate in Egypt. A close look at their complaint, and the symbolism of the foods they crave, can shed light on the contemporary issue of global hunger and the current debate over how international food aid from the United States should be delivered.

The Torah records the Israelites' memories of the food they ate in Egypt:

Numbers 11:4-6

The riffraff 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. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!"

במדבר יא:ד-ו

וְהָאִסְפָּסֹף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבוֹ הִתְאוּוּ תַאֲוָה וַיֵּשְׁבוּ וַיִּבְכוּ
גַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיֹּאמְרוּ מִי יֹאכְלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר׃ זָכַרְנוּ
אֶת־הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר־נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֵמָּה אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים
וְאֶת הָאֲבִטְחִים וְאֶת־הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת־הַבָּצָלִים
וְאֶת־הַשּׁוּמִים׃ וְעַתָּה נַפְשֵׁנוּ יִבֶּשֶׂה אֵין כֹּל בְּלִתֵּי
אֶל־הֶמָּן עֵינֵינוּ׃

Guiding Questions:

- What do you think the Israelites mean when they say that the fish in Egypt was "free"? In what ways might the manna not be free?
- What do the foods that the Israelites crave have in common and what might they symbolize?

David Arnow, in his book *Creating Lively Passover Seders*, points out one of the differences between the foods associated with Egypt in this passage and the foods (grapes, figs and pomegranates) which the spies who are sent to scout the Land of Israel bring back from their reconnaissance mission there several chapters later:

David Arnow, *Creating Lively Passover Seders*¹

Cucumbers, leeks, garlic, onions and melons are all annuals—they have to be replanted each year. Grapes, figs and pomegranates are perennials—plant them once and they produce for many, many years. They also take several years before they mature and bear fruit.

¹ David Arnow, *Creating Lively Passover Seders* (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2004) p. 228.

Guiding Question:

- On a symbolic level, why do you think annuals are associated with Egypt whereas perennials are associated with the Land of Israel?

According to Arnow's analysis, the foods of Egypt and slavery must be replanted every year. As such, they require constant labor and are only a short-term solution to people's hunger. In contrast, the foods of freedom and the Land of Israel may take longer to mature, but they are also a longer-term, more dependable solution to people's hunger as they will continue to bear fruit year after year.

This distinction between the characteristics of foods of slavery and foods of freedom can shed light on the contemporary debate around foreign food aid. While most of the food aid that the United States currently donates to countries facing famine and natural disaster is produced in the United States and shipped abroad, President Obama's recently proposed budget advocates a more flexible approach in which food would be purchased locally, in the region where the need exists. The following text describes the flaws of the current system:

Beverly Bell, "Weeding Corporate Power out of Agricultural Policies: Communities Mobilize for Food and Farm Justice"²

For nearly 60 years, U.S. law has required that all food aid distributed globally be grown in the US and shipped abroad. This system is inefficient, involving tremendous costs and time. More significantly, imported food aid undercuts farmers in recipient countries, who are often unable to sell their own food when competing with cheap U.S. products. While short-term needs for emergency food may be met, aid imports undermine the local food production that can address hunger in the long-term.

Guiding Questions:

- In what ways does the current food aid system perpetuate a slavery-like dependency on aid?
- Compare this text to the biblical text in which the Israelites long for the "free" fish from Egypt. In what ways is food aid free for those who receive it? What are the negative consequences or costs of this so-called free food aid?
- How would purchasing food locally help communities facing hunger become more self-sufficient and ultimately more free?

Conclusion

The Israelites' longing for Egypt, is interpreted as a sign that although they have been physically redeemed from Egypt, they have not yet made the emotional transition to being a free people. In contrast, recipients of U.S. food aid around the world are actively seeking their freedom from policies that enslave them to ongoing dependence on food donations and undermine their ability to provide for themselves in the long term. Let us stand in solidarity with their efforts and ensure that our government's policies promote the freedom and self-sufficiency of people everywhere.

To take action in support of a more flexible approach to food aid, visit www.ajws.org/reversehunger.

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² Beverly Bell, "Weeding Corporate Power out of Agricultural Policies: Communities Mobilize for Food and Farm Justice," *Huffington Post*, 29 April 2013. Available at http://www.huffingtonpost.com/beverly-bell/weeding-corporate-power-out_b_3178346.html.