



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Beha'alotcha 5768

By Rabbi Elliot Rose Kukla

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"I don't understand why I keep making the same mistakes," a patient of mine recently told me. He had called for a chaplain in the middle of the night because he felt overwhelmed by remorse. "I have been hospitalized five times now. I've lost my girlfriend, my friends, my law practice, all because of drinking... I really want to change, but somehow I just keep doing the same old things over and over again."

Change is hard.

We are in the middle of reading the book of *Bamidbar*, which is about the Israelites' struggle to leave slavery and abandon old behaviors. The Book of *Bamidbar* could be affectionately called the *Book of Kvetch*, as it is filled with complaining—the people remember slavery in Egypt fondly and regret their decision to move toward liberation. Most of this complaining is really a way of expressing the same heart-wrenching sentiment as my patient expressed—making fundamental life changes, even if they are life-saving ones like leaving slavery or quitting drinking, is extremely difficult. Even when we intellectually know we need to discard harmful addictions, behaviors or relationships, leaving behind old ways of being in the world is at best an ambiguous experience.

In this week's portion the people complain bitterly. "If only we had meat to eat," they wail. "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt for free, 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 forward to!"¹

It is hard to understand why the people remember slavery and oppression so warmly. Jewish sages question whether the Egyptian taskmasters really gave the Israelites fish for free and posit that the freedom that they are recalling in Egypt was actually a freedom from morality and obligation.² As slaves, the people did not have to make decisions—they did not even have to choose what to eat—and they were free from any responsibility. In the desert the people begin to mature and make choices for themselves, but still yearn for the deceptive "freedom" of slavery. In other words, the people had left slavery but not psychological bondage—they were still thinking like slaves as opposed to thinking like free people.

The contemporary writer William Bridges claims that there is a difference between change and transition:

Change is your move to a new city or your shift to a new job. It is the birth of a new baby or the death of your father... Change is situational. Transition on the other hand, is psychological. It is not those events, but rather the inner reorientation and self-redefinition that you have to go through in order to incorporate any of those changes into your life. Unless a transition happens, the change won't work, because it won't "take."³

¹ Bamidbar 11:5-6

² Midrash Sifrei Bamidbar 11:6

³ Bridges, William. "Managing Transitions: Making the Most of Change." Cambridge, MA: Perseus Pub, 2nd Edition, 2003, p. 3.

Leaving Egypt was a change. Leaving slavery is a transition.

In the contemporary world, we often talk about social change. Change is essential, but we also need social transition. Investing in the education of women is one example of promoting social transition. Studies have shown that when girls and women have more educational opportunities, rates of HIV infection are significantly lower.⁴ The education of women leads to transitions in the way individuals relate to each other, to their families and to the range of options they see for their own lives. When HIV prevalence drops, life expectancy and incomes rise. This in turn leads to even more educational options for women as well as men, and ultimately to the growth and improvement of society. In other words, making condoms and anti-retroviral medications more widely available promotes life-saving change, but educating women leads to transition in the way HIV/AIDS impacts the global community.

As my patient realized, change without transition is just a re-arranging of the furniture—the foundational problems of our lives stay the same, and we keep experiencing the same problems over and over again. The Israelites in this week's portion left Egypt but carried their slavery within them. In this season, as we read the Book of *Bamidbar*, may we learn from the Israelites' wandering and find a pathway out of both internal and external oppression. May we make not just changes, but also deep transitions that allow us to march forward toward a promised land of justice and freedom.



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⁴ For more information, see any of these reports: <http://www.unfpa.org/hiv/women/report/chapter5.html>, <http://womenandaids.unaids.org/tour/challenge.html>, http://www.un.org/Pubs/chronicle/2007/webArticles/030607_girls_aids.htm.

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