Parshat Beshalach 5769
By Alana Alpert
February 7, 2009

In Parshat Beshalach the Israelites escape slavery in Egypt through the miraculous parting of the Red Sea. In the very same parshah, they are abruptly confronted with the seemingly mundane concerns of their desert society. The first of these earthly matters is food: liberation euphoria wears off quickly when food anxiety kicks in.

Almost immediately after their escape from Egypt the Israelites experience what today we call “food insecurity.” Only three days after crossing the Red Sea they complain to Moses about a lack of water and shortly thereafter about a lack of food.1 The Israelites are so distraught that they proclaim they would rather have died in Egypt than experience freedom in this way. An overreaction, perhaps, but let’s consider just how frightening food insecurity might be, and in what ways it is akin to slavery. These oppressions share the quality of a lack of control, existence at the whim of outside forces.

In response to their anxieties about food, God explains to Moshe that the Israelites will be provided with manna (the biblical version of food aid), saying: “I will rain down for them food from heaven, and the people will go out and collect a daily portion every day.”2 That no one is able to take more or less than what they need allows for an egalitarian reading of this text, but the dependency the system of manna engenders is deeply problematic.

The students of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai ask him, “why did the manna not come down for the Israelites once a year [instead of every day]?” He answers that being forced to constantly wonder whether or not the manna will fall will cause them to feel dependent on God.3

This system of dependency is replicated today in global food policy. The goal of most food aid is to help those who are hungry become “food secure,” an objective that would ensure a sufficient amount and quality of food for a given population. While providing food to people suffering from starvation is certainly necessary and important, policies that focus only on food security encourage recipient countries to remain dependent on that aid.

In addition to fostering a system of dependency, the manna also failed to account for the food tastes and preferences of the Israelites. Not only did they lack control over their food systems, when it first fell they did not even know what it was! The rabbis are clearly concerned with the idea that the Israelites ate the same thing every day during their forty years in the desert. They develop a midrash that the manna could taste however the consumer wanted it to.4 This seems hard to believe, however, since the Israelites complain explicitly about lack of variety. They protest, “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.”5 Lacking taste and variety, the manna provided only physical sustenance.

1 Exodus 15:24 and 16:3.
2 Exodus 16:4.
3 Yoma 76b.
4 Yoma 75a.
5 Numbers 11:5.
Like the manna, food aid policies that focus only on food security are less concerned with what is being consumed, as long as calorie requirements are being met. These policies often ignore cultural preferences and traditional diets. It is clear that both today and in biblical times, food security is not enough; the goal must be “food sovereignty,” an approach that advocates for the right of people, particularly farmers and peasants, to control their own access to and production of food. La Via Campesina, an international movement for food justice, defines food sovereignty as: “The right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture; to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade in order to achieve sustainable development objectives; to determine the extent to which they want to be self reliant.”

This ideal was achieved by the Israelites when they entered the Promised Land. The manna ceased to fall, thus ending the period of transition in the wilderness, in which they had security, but not sovereignty over what they ate. Empowered to control the production and distribution of their food, the Israelites were able to perform much more complex and beautiful ethical mitzvot than the commandment in Parshat Beshalach to simply collect a daily portion of manna. They were able to care for the earth, practicing the shmitah year, and they were able to care for the disadvantaged, leaving the corners of their field un-harvested.

We witness the journey of the Israelites from food insecurity to food security, and arriving at food sovereignty. Let us support initiatives that seek to overthrow the shackles of dependency, enabling all people to exercise control over food production, distribution and consumption. This is a profound expression of freedom.

Alana Alpert earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in Community Studies from the University of California in Santa Cruz. She is an alumna of AJWS’s Volunteer Summer program in Ghana, AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps and ACTIVATE! The Community Organizing Fellowship of Social Justice Leadership. Alana has worked as an organizer at NY Jobs with Justice and Jews for Racial and Economic Justice and directed the New York City program of AVODAH. She is currently studying at the Conservative Yeshiva and volunteering with organizations working toward Israeli-Palestinian peace. Alana can be reached at alana.alpert@gmail.com.

6 The Food Corporation of India distributes grain across the country through the Public Distribution System (PDS). While millets and pulses were the staple grains for household consumption in many areas of India, the PDS was based on the wheat and rice model, significantly changing the food habits of many Indians. Kanchi Kohli, “Food sovereignty, not just security.” India Together, October 31, 2005. http://www.indiatogether.org/2005/act/aor-agr-sovereign.htm


©2009 American Jewish World Service

To subscribe to this publication, please visit www.ajws.org/parshah.

The writers of the Dvar Tzedek are the inaugural recipients of the Lisa Goldberg Memorial Fellowship. As President of the Charles S. Revson Foundation and as a mother, wife, colleague and friend, Lisa Goldberg had a profound commitment to social justice and the Jewish community. She died tragically at the age of 54. Lisa was a good friend and generous supporter of AJWS, and we hope that, through these words of tzedek, we can contribute to her legacy.

AJWS is committed to a pluralistic view of Judaism and honors the broadest spectrum of interpretation of our texts and traditions. The statements made and views expressed in this commentary are solely the responsibility of the author. The AJWS Torah Commentary series is made possible in part by funds granted by the Charles H. Revson Foundation.