

WHINGING ABOUT GARLIC

Text 1 – Numbers 11:1-2, 4-9, 11-15, 18-20

The people took to complaining bitterly before the Eternal One. God heard and was incensed: a divine fire broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moses. Moses prayed to the Eternal One, and the fire died down.



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 shrivelled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!”

Now the manna was like [REDACTED], and in colour it was like bdellium. The people would go about and gather it, grind it between millstones or pound it in a mortar, boil it in a pot, and make it into cakes. It tasted like rich cream. When the dew fell on the camp at night, the manna would fall upon it.

Moses was distressed. And Moses said to God, “Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favour, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, ‘Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,’ to the land that You have promised on oath to their ancestors? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, ‘Give us meat to eat!’ I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!”

And God said: “Tell the people: tomorrow you shall eat meat, for you have kept whining before the Eternal One and saying, ‘If only we had meat to eat! Indeed, we were better off in Egypt!’ The Eternal One 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 Eternal One who is among you, by whining before God.”

Text 3 – a (well-worn) joke

“So, really, how was life back in Russia?” an Israeli asks a new immigrant just arrived from the former Soviet Union.

“I couldn’t complain,” he answers.

“And how were your living quarters there?”

Again, the same answer: “I couldn’t complain.”

“And your standard of living?”

And again, “I couldn’t complain.”

“Well,” asks the Israeli, “if everything was so good back in Russia, why did you bother coming here?”

“Oh,” replies the new oleh, “here I can complain!”

Text 4 – the appropriately-named Rabbi Raymond Apple, 2016

Ask many people to nominate the best days of their lives, and they will pinpoint an episode or period in their past. Distance made the Israelites’ hearts grow fonder. They saw even Egypt through rose-coloured spectacles. Compared to the past, the present was unimpressive.

There is a value in nostalgia. But life cannot be lived backward. Only in your fantasies can you be back again re-living your childhood or any other stage of your life history.

Every today is a new, exciting opportunity. And every tomorrow is exciting, because if I handle today wisely I can help to shape the future.

You want to look back? Good luck to you. Maybe the fish really was tastier then, and the cucumbers were better, and the melons, leeks, onions and garlic too. But as Solomon Schechter said, you cannot feel with your grandfather’s heart. You can think of the past, but you have to live your life forward.

Text 5 – Exodus Rabbah 7:3

God said to Moses and Aaron, “My children are obstinate, bad-tempered, and troublesome. In assuming leadership over them, you must expect that they will curse you and even stone you.”

Text 6 – Piska d’Rav Kahana

At first [in Exodus 3] the Holy One said to Moses: “Now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh, and take My people [...] out of Egypt.” But after they made the golden calf, God said [in Exodus 32]: “Your people whom you have brought out of Egypt have become corrupt!”

Moses exclaimed before the Holy One: “Creator of the universe, when they are sinners, they are mine, and when they are righteous, they are Yours?”

Text 7 – Karen Winkler Weiss, 2003

A friend once said to me, “Everyone’s worst problem is just as bad for them as your worst problem is for you.”

In this parasha, we see a striking difference between the kvetching of the people, who behave like children, and the torments of their leader, who feels as if he is the parent of an entire family of screaming brats.

According to the text, the troublemakers – *‘hasafsuf’*, translated as “riffraff” to recall the Hebrew noun’s onomatopoeic quality – try to incite nostalgia for Egypt by conjuring up images of tasty, varied foods, in contrast to the bland diet of manna. Are the people truly suffering from hunger?

Rashi says that the people are simply exhausted and upset. Their whining is like that of children, and their complaints are really just a call for comfort that, in the wilderness, is hard to come by. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch sees the Israelites as suffering from boredom; God provides all their food and water, Moses makes all the decisions, and thus the people themselves have no real goals or challenges. Their problem isn’t hunger, Hirsch contends, but monotony.

Text 8 – Exodus Rabbah 43:7

Moses said: “Creator of the universe, from where did you bring the Israelites out? From Egypt! Where everyone worships lambs!”

This can be compared to a wise person who opened a perfume store for his son in a street of prostitutes. The street did its part, the business did its part, and the young man did his part and fell into bad ways. His father came and caught him with prostitutes. He yelled: “I will kill you!” A friend was there who said to the father: “You caused the boy’s ruination, yet you are screaming at him. You ignored all other occupations and taught him perfumery, you ignored all other streets and could only open the store in the street of prostitutes.”

So too did Moses say: “You caused your children to be enslaved in Egypt: that is from whom your children learned and made the golden calf!”

Text 9 – the political theory of anacyclosis

