



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Beshalach 5769

By Alana Alpert

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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.⁶

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.”⁷

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.



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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/oct/agr-sovereign.htm>

⁷ “Peoples’ Food Sovereignty Statement” by the Via Campesina, et al., 1996.

http://www.nyeleni2007.org/IMG/pdf/Peoples_Food_Sovereignty_Statement.pdf

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