

Parashat Beshalach

Mixed Motives

By Micha Berger

This week's Torah portion, *Beshalach*, has some major highlights – the Israelites finally leaving Egypt, the splitting of the Red Sea, the war against the Amalekites ... But now that I mentioned the events everyone ought to be aware are read from the Torah this week, we are going to discuss some of the stuff between them that a Reader's Digest might choose to skip.

Twice in the *sedra* (Torah portion) the people ask for water. Asking for water, which one needs for survival, makes sense. But when the masses also approach Moshe and Aharon (Moses and Aaron) about food (Exodus 16:2), they went overboard:

“If only we had died by HaShem's “Hand” in the Land of Egypt, when we sat by the stewpots, when we ate bread until we were full! For HaShem took us out to this desert, to kill off the whole community with starvation!” (v. 3)

Did they really think that when HaShem split the sea to let them safely through and drown their oppressors, God was really doing so as part of a plan to kill them?

Despite their lack of trust and the ungrateful way they asked, HaShem accepts their request (v. 12-14), and this is when manna first appears, promised to arrive with the morning dew. And more, they will get quail every evening to refill those stewpots.

What interested me was how Moshe and Aharon phrase their reply. Initially (v. 6), “And Moses and Aharon said to all the Children of Israel, ‘Come evening, you will know that it was HaShem who took you out of Egypt....’” At first, they answer together.

But then it switches to Moshe speaking alone (v. 8), “Since it is HaShem who will give ... because HaShem listened to your whining which you whine about him. What is our [Moshe and Aharon's] part? We aren't the subject of your whining, but HaShem is!”

And then he has a second message, specifically given via Aharon, “Moshe said to Aharon, ‘Tell the whole Israelite community, to come close before Me, because I have listened to your whining.’” (v. 9)

Each leader is tasked with relaying a different message. Moshe gives the rebuke, Aharon provides sympathy. Moshe's job is to get them to change, Aharon's – emotional support.

But it struck me, perhaps they are each responding to a different level of the message.

Aharon dealt with the community's needs. It was appropriate to worry about food supplies. And his message only addressed that aspect of things, as though the more distrustful and ungrateful undercurrent weren't there.

But as the spiritual teacher, Moshe had to deal with making sure the community was on course. He couldn't ignore the accusatory tone! "For HaShem took us out to this desert, to kill off the whole community with starvation!"

With that in mind, the sequence is interesting – first the rebuke, then "God has listened to you." Because how else can one give rebuke that will actually be received? The parting message needed to be reconciliatory, optimistic.

The way the Jews responded to the lack of food is typical of people in general. We often aren't aware of all our motives. We can have a reasonable complaint or opinion, we could do the right thing but still be coming at it from the wrong place. When we protest injustice, is it purely out of righteous indignation, or are there also elements of simply wanting to win? Is that my political camp, my "team," win a part of what is motivating me?

Rav Nosson Zvi Finkel, the Alter of Slabodka, was once diagnosed with a serious illness; he needed a major medical center. He was given information about each of his choices and was asked which one he would go to. The Alter chose the hospital in St. Petersburg. Upon his return, someone from the community who had noticed that he hadn't been around asked where he had been. The Alter replied that he had been to St. Petersburg. The man asked why. He answered, "I went to see a push-button umbrella."

His students asked the Alter why he said this. After all, the decision to go to St. Petersburg was made after hearing all his options, much consideration and deliberation about which was the best hospital for his illness. Why did he say it was about an umbrella?

The Alter explained that a short while earlier, he was traveling around the region on yeshiva business and had arrived in St. Petersburg. He was amazed by this new invention he saw there, an umbrella that opens with the push of the umbrella. Laying in his hospital bed, the Alter realized that the experience colored his decision. A component of the decision was his association of the city with the latest invention and his desire to see them.

Way back in the beginning, as in the beginning of everything, God created light. But it isn't until Bereishit (Genesis) 1:4 that "God separated between the light and the darkness." Our sages say that until then "light and darkness were used *be'irbuvia* – in a mixture." (*Bereishit Rabba* 3:6, quoted by Rashi ad loc)

We have a tradition (Talmud Sanhedrin 38b) that when Adam and Eve ate from the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, they did so at twilight as the first Shabbat was beginning. In the evening, which in Hebrew is called "*erev*" from the same root as

the Midrash's word for mixture "*irbuvia*". Evening, when light and dark, day and night, are mixed.

The Alter of Slabodka points out: the tree they ate from isn't called "The Tree of Knowledge of Evil" or "The Tree of Knowledge of Good *and of Evil*." Rather, the fruit changed humanity so that our thoughts are now a mixture of good-and-evil, hence, "The Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil."

Irbuvia. A constant mixture of emotions and motivations. No good deed lacks some "*negi'ot*," some selfish side-motivation or bias, no matter how small. Which is why many synagogues require appeals to publicly announce donations in order to raise enough money to operate. We cannot assume generosity alone will be enough and so we acknowledge the honor and competition for the honor that also motivates people to give.

It is certainly okay to worry about feeding one's family. But not to abandon Trust so far as to blame HaShem while being surrounded by miracles.

The question for us is how to separate out the holy and the ideal from among our motives rather than be moved by a mixture of good and evil.

And this is why maintaining a *cheshbon hanefesh* (accounting of the soul), *middah* journaling, is so critical. When we do the right thing, we do not want to look for and face our less-than-ideal motives. Taking time each day to look at the day's decisions – even the decisions we feel were correct – and trying to pin down why we made them, is critical.

And to turn to a theme from Alan Morinis's new book, *The Shabbat Effect*, guides us to a productive use of our day off. A day to take a break from striving to check in with what we are striving for. Indeed, Shabbat is called "*Me'ein Olam haBah* – a glimpse of the world to come." A world where our internal light and darkness are separated, where we are healed from the taint of the fruit.