

Dvar Torah – Fabrangen – Parsha Beha’alotcha – June 14 2025

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- In this parsha, something of great Jewish cultural significance is introduced...
- People kvetching about the food!

- This episode of complaining is akin to the one just after the Israelites crossed the Red Sea. The people ask then why they even left Egypt, only to die in the wilderness. G-d responds by providing them with manna.
- But now in our parsha, the people are *bored* with manna, and lusting after the fish, melons, leeks, onions they ate “freely” in Egypt.
- One way to read this is they are simply petty and ungrateful.

- Another read, inspired by Rabbi Jonathan Saks, is that the people are struggling with the task before them – learning to live as free people.
- In the face of that challenge, they engage in what Prof. Ron Heifetz terms “work avoidance.” They...
 - o Make excuses – if only the food were better!
 - o Manufacture drama – “each person wailed at the entrance of their tent”
 - o Undercut authority figures – as Aaron and Miriam do in their power play against Moses at the end of the parsha
 - o Scapegoating – Fomenting concern about Moses marrying a Cushite woman
 - o Perhaps most of all, we see the use of what Anne Applebaum calls “restorative nostalgia” – the longing for a mythic past. Such campaigns prey on those contending with dislocation, dangling the promise to make a society *great* again. Similarly, the Israelites long for their time in Egypt, which they imagine to have been flavorful and bountiful – and perhaps simpler.

- In the face of these avoidance strategies, Moses is *demoralized*. He despairs, perhaps because it’s been over a year since the people left Egypt – yet they are still rehearsing the same complaints. After all this freedom, the people are stuck on how *good* life was as slaves.

- They have internalized their powerlessness and passivity. And for a while, that worked out okay for them. Rabbi Saks points out, that passivity worked when it was G-d that performed miracles in Egypt, G-d that provided manna when they were hungry, G-d that produced water from a rock when they were thirsty.

- But *now*, the Israelites are being asked to take a much more *active* role in their future – living out the instructions they just received at Sinai about how to conduct their lives, as free people. They are being asked to adapt, to take responsibility for themselves. And clearly, that’s hard.
- The parsha offers some ideas on how to respond to this kind of fear and cynicism. After Moses does some productive *venting* to G-d, they together *close off* various pathways of work avoidance, to help the people refocus on the task at hand.
 - o In the case of the food complaints, G-d heaps quail on the camp, and then brings a deadly plague on all who had stuffed themselves with the meat. This could be a way of shutting off gluttony as a pathway to distraction, urging us to focus on digesting the blessings we have.
 - o In addition, G-d instructs Moses to appoint 70 elders, who can help carry the leadership burden. Empowering others in this way invites more people to “own the work” of adapting to a new reality. Moses even responds to the grassroots prophesy of Eldad and Medad in a most democratic way, saying – “I wish all G-d’s people were prophets.” He really understood the havurah ethos!
- To me, we can read this parsha as a story of people facing *rapid* change, and in response, they crave stability and comfort. Slavery – however problematic – was at least *predictable*.
- This human tendency is familiar – the temptation to cling to that which is safe and *small*, rather than take risks to pursue something *better*.
 - o We can respond to this tendency – in ourselves and in others – with *compassion*, asking *what kind of support, scaffolding, and solidarity we would need* in order to take *good risks*. In order to adapt.
 - o We should also be *wary* of those who try and *exploit* the fear of change by sowing division or evoking lust for an imagined past. That will only pull us down.
- In all this, I take inspiration from communities that *are* adapting, across many chapters, like *Fabrangen*. Seeking to refresh its long-term priorities -- combining new evolutions and old comforts – in order to *keep pace* with people’s needs.
- As Reb Jonah Steinberg pointed out to me, we sing *Chadesh yameinu k’kedem* – *Renew* our days, as they were; not *Chazor yameinu* – *Restore* our days. If we want things to be as they were, in their *essence*, we’ll have to continuously renew them, in our day-to-day.

- And in the spirit of today's celebration, this theme of adaptation also seems central to long-term relationships. A continual *series of chapters*, of growing *together*, while holding firm to core values.

With that, let me pose a few questions for our discussion:

1. What do you see as some of the fears or concerns that might be driving the Israelites' many complaints and diversions while wandering in the desert?
2. What lessons have you seen, either from the text or our lives, in how to support people through periods of change? How can we help our relationships and our communities avoid becoming brittle or avoidant, and instead become adaptive to new realities?