

## Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BAMIDBAR

NASO

BEHAALOTECHA

SHELACH

KORACH

CHUKKAT

BALAK

PINCHAS

MATOT

MASSEI

# BEHAALOTECHA

## IMAGE IS NOTHING -

## TASTE IS EVERYTHING

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**Above** all else, a leader needs to understand his people. Throughout his years of leadership, Moses displays a profoundly deep understanding of and a high tolerance threshold for the Jewish nation. But one of the few sagas that places a real strain on his patience and causes him to request that God end his mission, is the case of their complaint about the manna, when he says: 'And if this is how You deal with me, then kill me now.'<sup>1</sup>

**In** comparison to the exotic Egyptian cuisine - the 'cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic',<sup>2</sup> that the Jews remember with nostalgia - in the desert, they have 'nothing to anticipate but the manna'<sup>3</sup> - a uniform substance lacking visual appeal. This complaint is strange. Whereas the food the Jewish people received in Egypt was limited to that which was given to them by their Egyptian masters, the Midrash<sup>4</sup> says that

**the miraculous manna from heaven tasted like whatever the Jews desired, and was thus only limited by the constraints of their imaginations.** So what was the complaint about?

**Perhaps** the complaint is not actually regarding the taste of the substance, but rather its form. During their sojourn in Egypt, the Jewish people become accustomed to a more superficial existence, one where image matters more than essence. Now, however, having left the superficial society of Egypt in the physical sense, God is helping them detach from it in a spiritual sense too. He is trying to teach them that it is what is on the inside that counts. As it says in Tractate *Avot*, 'Do not look at the jug, but rather at what is inside.'<sup>5</sup> Missing the point of this lesson, the people still crave the more sophisticated appearance of luscious-looking food.

**In** Proverbs, King Solomon writes, 'Grace is deceptive and beauty is vain: It is a God-fearing woman who should be praised.'<sup>6</sup> Solomon, one of the wisest men to have ever lived,<sup>7</sup> astutely states that **inner integrity and conviction transcend the more fleeting and transient outer beauty.** When the generation of the desert worry about the way their food looks, it makes the tastiest of foods seem distasteful. At the end of the day presentation and taste are indeed both important. But before worrying about its physical arrangement on the plate, in order for the food to be delicious and nutritious it needs to be cooked well, with the appropriate ingredients and techniques. Similarly, with people, both internal character and external appearances are indeed of value, but the priority must always be on building a stellar internal character. Often in today's society too, people care more about other's perceptions



of physical appearances than about what is going on inside.

**In** ancient times, there was a practice among the Egyptian elite to be buried in their pyramids and vaults together with their treasures and valuables, rather than passing them on to be utilised by the next generation. Such a custom highlights their focus, even in death, on the external image they portray to others.

**This** is the culture that the generation of the desert is born into, and that presumably influenced their focus on superficiality and externals. Now, as they journey through the desert, God is helping this fledgling nation, a people who by no choice of their own have become slaves to superficiality, to rebuild themselves from the inside out. Through the divine gift of manna, which represents internal goodness alone and

displays a complete absence of external beauty, **God is teaching the Jewish people the rich value of inner taste and meaning, in contrast to the vacuous and relatively insignificant nature of the outer facade.**

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Numbers 11:15. <sup>2</sup> Numbers 11:5.

<sup>3</sup> Numbers 11:6. <sup>4</sup> Exodus Rabba 5:9.

<sup>5</sup> Mishna, Tractate Avot 4:20.

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 31:30. <sup>7</sup> I Kings 5:10.

#### Parasha Fact:

Although quail is kosher, many today abstain from eating it due to its connection with the Jews' complaining in this week's parasha.

#### Next week in Shelach:

*Scouts are sent to the Land of Israel with the task of assessing the Promised Land. Following months of wandering in the desert, and generations of dreaming of the Land, the nation's eyes and ears are all focused on the return of the scouts, eagerly awaiting their positive report. And yet in the ultimate anticlimax, the scouts return despondent and negative. How did it all go so wrong? An analysis of the episode of the scouts highlights for us the importance of maintaining a strong self-image in the face of adversity, and the inherent dangers of placing too great an emphasis on the perceptions of others.*

שבת שלום