

DVAR TORAH - PARASHAT BESHALACH – Shabbat 15 January 2022

In this week's parashah, we heard how some amazing things happened to the children of Israel. Pharaoh finally set them free and let them leave Egypt; the Red Sea split in half to allow them to pass, before drowning the Egyptians; and God provided food and water whilst the Israelites were in the desert.

But what I want to look at is that we also saw a lot of complaining from the Israelites, for example, when they complained to Moses that they were hungry and thirsty.

So why is it that when so many good things happen, our instinct is still to complain?

We can see from our own lives during the pandemic, that there are lots of reasons why people might complain. The first is expectation versus reality. For the children of Israel, they thought that not being slaves anymore would be the end of their problems, but in reality, they had to do everything for themselves. All the decisions that people used to make for them were suddenly their responsibility and they didn't like this, so they complained. For us in 2021, when the Government relaxed restrictions, we had to decide whether to wear a mask, whether to book a holiday, and whether to go to restaurants and parties. We thought we wanted freedom to make those decisions, but actually it led to lots of arguments and complaints, and we discovered that it's hard to make those choices for ourselves.

But is complaining perhaps good too? If we just blindly accept what teachers and parents say, then we wouldn't have a healthy relationship. After all, the Israelites knew little of Moses and Aaron; they needed to build up their trust in very difficult circumstances when they literally feared for their lives. In our daily davening, we ask God for more: more health, more years, more compassion, we ask God to destroy our enemies, and so on. In doing this, are we showing God how we feel and what we are frightened of?

The next big reason to complain is fear. What were the Israelites afraid of? Probably everything – running out of food and water, fear that their leader wasn't up to the job, fear of being attacked by other tribes. For the last two years, we have been scared of getting really ill or dying from Covid, but when the miracle happened and we got a vaccine, some people were scared of that too, and complained that it had been rushed through, or not tested properly, or that it would change their DNA.

Having just come out of slavery, it was hardly surprising that the children of Israel were frightened; they had nothing to build on, no strategies to manage anxiety. This was perhaps the reason, as suggested by Rashi, why they had to take the long way to the Promised Land in order that they could learn to think for and trust themselves.

When the children of Israel left Egypt, they weren't really a community. They had to learn how to act like a community, how to trust each other and stick up for one another. We all go through things like this, for example, when we start a new school, and we learn to make new friends. Sometimes, there's nastiness and bullying, and we have to work out how to act towards each other and how to work together. Luckily, it usually only takes a few weeks, not 40 years.

The third reason I want to look at is that people forget too soon. The children of Israel had an awful life, but then they started to look back at their life in Egypt and forgot all the bad things. They compared it with their lives in the desert and decided that Egypt wasn't that bad. In our day-to-day lives we do this too. We complain about having to wear masks, about sore arms from vaccines, about not being able to go on holiday, but if we look back almost two years, the world was so much scarier – no vaccines, no treatments. We forget too soon. Is this why we are reminded constantly in our liturgy and at Pesach that we were slaves in Egypt? Could it be that, once we are settled and safe, forgetting is easy and we need reminders of harder times?

So, what do I think? Well, right now, I could be complaining about so many things: the fact that my bat mitzvah party has been postponed and that very few of my family and friends are here with me in shul today, but if I look at the whole situation today I can think about all the good things – I can still become bat mitzvah in my community, with some of my friends and family present, and maybe my party won't be tomorrow but I can still look forward to it later this year. The children of Israel had the Promised Land to look forward to, and we can all have the hope that things will get better for us, wherever we are.

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