

PARASHAH ONE HUNDRED AND SEVEN
Numbers 11:1–35; Judges 6:1–16; Matthew 6:25–30

notes by Tim Hegg

The Great Treasure of Contentment

In our Torah section today we rehearse that familiar story of the nation's discontentment as they journeyed to the promised land. Apparently, some brought their complaints to the priests and Moses (thus “in the hearing of the Lord”), while others simply stayed on the fringe of the community and fostered an ill spirit among any who would listen to their complaints. HaShem's wrath is first seen by a consuming fire which devours some on the outskirts of the camp. Thus, we learn from the outset of this story that God is not pleased with His people when they foster an ungrateful spirit.

But really—do you blame them? How would you like to eat the same food day in and day out? How would like to look forward to breakfast, lunch, and dinner as the same bland bread cakes? After you had fixed them every way conceivable, you might want to voice your complaints as well! So before we're too harsh on the Israelites, let's try to walk in their sandals.

Certainly God understood this human dilemma. He knew that eating food was more than just subsisting, that it involved one of the great pleasures of human existence. So why is He so angry—angry enough to take the lives of some of the complainers? Once again, if we're honest with ourselves and each other, it seems a bit harsh for God to punish the Israelites for what is admittedly a very human reaction. But let's look closer.

The events which had just transpired were, by all measures, awesome. The people had willingly given of their possessions to construct the Tabernacle and all of its furniture and utensils. The Ruach had filled the workers with special ability so that the Tabernacle's construction was truly a divine work of art. Then, at the appointed moment, the cloud of God's glory, the Shekinah, came and filled the Mishkan in the sight of all the people. He promised to lead the people with the cloud of His glory by day, and the awesome flame of His presence by night. In a grandiose way, God had proven to His people that He intended to dwell with them, and to undertake their every necessity in order to bring them safely to the Land He had promised to give them. In short, He invited them to trust in His all-powerful and all-loving care. He asked them to believe.

Their grumbling, then, is nothing short of faithlessness—unbelief—an overt manifestation of a heart prone to lean on oneself rather than upon God. They had allowed the natural inclinations of their flesh to overpower the call upon their souls to trust in God. If in bringing their possessions to construct the Tabernacle they demonstrated “loving the Lord with their might” (or possessions, as the Sages interpret), they are here, in our context, being asked to demonstrate that they love Him with all their heart (one's thought processes) and soul (one's inner strength). Could they put aside the longings of the flesh in order to follow the One who had delivered them and promised to sustain them? In reality, what was being asked of them is not far different than what God asks of us, and of all His children in every era. He asks us to be genuinely content with His provision. He asks us to confess that He is really all we need.

The story shifts from the people to the conversation which Moses and God have together. Moses, as the leader of the people, comes bearing his heart before the Lord. Most important for us in this pericope is to see the difference between bringing one's burdens to the Lord as contrasted with complaining. What Moses does is acceptable; what the people did was not. What's the difference? Note well that the initial complaints were done “in the hearing of the Lord” and apparently

at the outskirts of the camp. The people talked to other people—Moses went straight to God. God welcomes His people coming to Him with their burdens and woes. What He does not tolerate is “spreading strife among the brothers” (Prov 6:19).

Moses therefore brings the situation directly to God. He explains that it is not his responsibility to carry the people as a nursing mother carries her infant child. He further admits that he is entirely burned out, and that if God expects him to keep up carrying the people's burdens, He may as well take his life, because it will most likely kill him anyway!

God responds, not with anger or disappointment (as we might expect Him to if we think He acts as we would), but with understanding and compassion—and with a plan. Seventy elders (eventually this becomes the basis for the number of the Sanhedrin) will stand before the Lord with Moses, and will receive a special endowment of the Ruach, in order that they, along with Moses, might share the burden of the people.

What is more, God promises to give the people exactly what they ask for—meat, meat, and more meat! So much meat will be given that they will eventually be sorry they ever complained. Meat will be coming out of their ears!

Now, in this we find yet another important principle of life for the redeemed: contentment is bound up with the work of the Spirit. A most interesting phenomenon occurs when the Spirit is given to the elders—they begin to prophecy, but apparently when they leave the court of the Tabernacle, this phenomenon ceases. Two men, however, named Eldad and Medad, remain in the camp and continue to prophecy. Joshua, seeing them manifest the presence of the Ruach, is concerned that they might detract from the honor given to Moses and the position of leadership he bore. But Moses' response is instructive: “would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!” Moses realizes that the presence of the Spirit in the lives of the people would be the means by which their hearts could be changed, and they could learn the lessons of loving God with all their heart and soul, as well as their possessions.

In this we see the some very important characteristics of a godly leader. He knows how to go directly to God and to seek His counsel first. Secondly, he demonstrates a genuine heart of concern for the people. The problems they were creating were viewed more as an indication of their spiritual lack rather than as an attack upon Moses. Thirdly, Moses is not “building his own kingdom,” but is intent on serving in such a way as to bring glory to God. He genuinely wants the people to experience the blessings of walking in the power of the Spirit—he doesn't consider this close fellowship something that belongs to just an elite few.

There are also lessons each of us should take to heart from this portion—lessons of contentment that are as applicable today as they were in ancient times. In our affluent society, it is important to regularly ask ourselves about priorities. Do we set our hearts upon those things that are closest to God's heart? Do we find a genuine contentment in His provisions? What is it that satisfies the deepest longing of our souls?

The Israelite people thought it would be food, but they discovered that food could not overcome the depraved spirit of greediness. Even when God graciously gave them that for which they had asked, they were greedy. The meat only increased their capacity to sin! What they needed, and what we need likewise, is the inner working of the Spirit of God to change our hearts—to do that deep soul-work in us, whereby we are enabled to love God with all our hearts, soul and might—and ... our neighbor as our self. This produces, in fact, the valuable commodity we call contentment.

In fact, contentment in God is the sure fruit of genuine faith. “God is most glorified in us when

we are most satisfied with Him.” There is a great strength in contentment, because contentment flows from a heart that has learned to trust in God. In the morning prayers we recite: “Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Who has given me everything I need.” But do we really believe that He has, indeed, given us everything we need? If so—if we genuinely believe that our every need has been met by the hand of the Almighty, then we are content with what He has given us. Like the child who knows that his mother or father will give him everything he needs, so we, with child-like faith, rest in the provision of our heavenly Father. And in this rest we experience the rare and precious treasure of contentment.

Contentment has as its companion a heart of thanksgiving; murmuring is partner with greed. Contentment views the bigger picture; murmuring focuses only on the present difficulty. Contentment remembers the good; murmuring remembers the bad. Contentment loves; murmuring hates. Contentment trusts in God’s goodness; murmuring questions God’s goodness. Contentment is the fruit of the Spirit; murmuring proceeds from the flesh.

It is not as though contentment disregards the calamities of this life, or is unwilling to disagree or voice clear differences with others. Contentment is not a “Pollyanna” approach to life, with one’s head buried in the sand to avoid confronting the real issues. But what characterizes contentment is the *manner* in which the hardships of this world are confronted—the *way* one approaches disappointments in other people. Surely the contented heart can raise serious issues, and even confront and rebuke those considered to be in the wrong, but it does so with the goal of making things right, not with a spirit of selfish divisiveness.

In short, the rare jewel of contentment begins by being fully satisfied with God and His grace. Once the heart is content with God Himself, it ceases to place upon others the unwarranted expectation of providing contentment. As Paul confessed: “Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am” (Phil 4:11).