

Parashah Fifty-Seven

Exodus 15:19–16:24; Isaiah 45:18–25; John 6:31–51

notes by Tim Hegg

The Bread from Heaven

Our text describes the beginnings of the journey of Israel through the Sinai desert on their way to the Promised Land, following their liberation from the slavery of Egypt. One can only imagine the mixed emotions of the people as they left the oppression of more than four generations. All they had known was slavery, and all their parents, grandparents, and many great-grandparents had known was oppression. Slavery had become a way of life, and freedom was an unknown quantity. Venturing out into the wilderness of Sinai undoubtedly presented fears and misgivings. How would they survive? How would they face the challenges of the unknown? As a nation of former slaves, could they really hope to defend themselves against nations with organized armies?

Before we summarily point our fingers at the lack of faith that would be evidenced by the beleaguered nation, we should ask ourselves how we might have acted. When faced with the unknown future, are we resolute in our faith? Even when we are certain of God’s favor toward us, do we approach the difficult events of life with a resolute and unwavering faith? In many ways, the story of Israel’s grumblings in the desert mirror our own deficiencies.

Our *parashah* begins with an epilogue to the Song at the Sea. Miriam traditionally is identified as the older sister of Moses and Aaron, who was instrumental in saving the infant Moses by intervening when Pharaoh’s daughter found him in the waters of the Nile (cf. Num 26:59; 1Chron 6:3). She obviously held a leadership position within the nation (cf. Mic 6:4), for in the course of time, she sided with Aaron against Moses as the sole spokesman of God to the nation (Num 12). In our text, she leads the women in the Song at the Sea in a kind of antiphonal chorus.

Israel enters the “wilderness of Shur (שׁוּר),” a designation for the northwest desert of the Sinai peninsula. They journeyed for three days without finding an oasis that could provide the people and their flocks drinking water. This was no small problem! Three days in the desert without water spelled certain disaster if the problem was not resolved. When they finally arrived at Marah, the water there was brackish, and could not be used. Marah (meaning “bitter”) is usually identified with *Ain Hawarah*, located about 45 miles southeast of the Gulf of Suez. The name Marah is given to the place by Israel in light of her experience of finding that the waters there were bitter. Imagine finally coming upon water after three days in the desert, and then realizing that it cannot be used! The result was that the people complained against (עַל) Moses. Our natural inclination is to complain when natural supplies are exhausted. Faith looks beyond the natural to the supernatural.

Here is the first miracle of preservation given to the people by God, a miracle that also brings with it a testing of the people’s faith. Hearing the complaint of the people, Moses cries out to God. He is shown a nearby “tree” (עֵץ can refer to anything of wood) which he throws into the water, and they become sweet. *Mechilta* notes that this is a double miracle, for the tree (or wood) itself was most likely bitter, but it turned the waters sweet.

Verse 25 ends with a very important notice: “There He made for them (לֵוֹ) a statute (חֻק) and regulation (מִשְׁפָּט), and there He tested them (נִסָּהוּ).” The Sages note that God gave to Israel “statutes and regulations” before ever coming to Sinai and the giving of the Torah. Perhaps this notice

is a general summary of all that would transpire at this place, including the giving of manna and quail, and the commandments regarding the gathering and preparation of the manna. But its inclusion here, at the miracle of the bitter waters, tells us that God’s miracles on behalf of His people also present a test. Would they accept the work of God as sufficient for their needs, or would they continue to rely upon their own means for self-preservation? Inevitably, when God intervenes in the lives of His children, His hand of provision requires a response of faithful reliance. The purpose of God’s miracles, which are with us every day, is to strengthen our faith in Him. Apart from the exercise of faith, the ultimate purpose of miracles is short-circuited. This is the meaning of Matthew 13:58— “And He (Yeshua) did not do many miracles there because of their unbelief.”

Generally, the rabbis delineate a difference between a “statute” (חֻק) and a “regulation” (מִשְׁפָּט) in this way: a “statute” is a commandment given by God for which there can be given no rational explanation. In other words, the commandment is to be done simply because it is required, not because we can figure out exactly why we are to do it. In contrast, a “regulation” is something that makes sense rationally. Whether or not such a distinction can be maintained in every usage of these terms, it is true that sometimes God gives us commandments without adding any explanation—He simply expects us to obey because He has commanded us to do so. In other cases, His commandments come with a fuller explanation of why the regulation makes good sense. In either case, the laws of God are received by the heart of faith as those things which our loving Father has given for our good and His glory. Inevitably, obedience is the mark of genuine faith.

It is interesting that this notice regarding God’s “statute” and “regulation” comes at the place called Marah (“bitter”). By God’s providence, we may be led into times of difficulty—experiences where the water is “bitter” rather than “sweet.” It is in these times when His commandments become the proof of our faith. Will we remain faithful to Him in spite of the current trouble? Will we continue to obey His statutes when the way forward seems impossible? What we discover is that within God’s commandments there is a divine protection for our souls. The heart of faith lays hold of God’s instruction (Torah), lives in accordance with His commandments, and finds in this reliance upon His goodness a path through the troubled times. “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Ps 119:105). Our natural inclination may be to scurry about to find our own path—to resolve the problem in our own way. But a maturing faith sets itself to seek and obey God’s commandments, and finds in them a light showing His divinely ordained path through life’s harshest deserts. “Your statutes are my songs in the house of my pilgrimage” (Ps 119:54).

This is the specific message of God’s words to the nation in our text (15:26):

And He said, “If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the Lord, am your healer.”

God identifies Himself as Israel’s “healer” (אֲנִי יְהוָה רֹפֵאֶךָ, *'ani Adonai Rof'echa*). When He brings His people into a wasting desert, He does so not with the purpose of simply afflicting them or causing them trouble. Rather, He does so as the miraculous Healer, to demonstrate His greatness to them. But note carefully that such healing comes as His people exercise their faith in Him. Obedience to His commandments is a demonstration of true faith. This verse teaches that if we place our faith in Him, a faith demonstrated by obedience, He will protect us and heal us, that is, transform us into the people He intends for us to be. His purpose for leading us into the desert is that He might

heal us. He is “Adonai your healer.”

This is demonstrated by the flow of the narrative. Even though the people were given sweet water at Marah, v. 27 immediately notes that the people came to Elim, a name that most likely describes this palm grove—an oasis in the desert. At Elim, twelve springs bubbled forth, one for each of the twelve tribes, signalling the fact that full provision for the nation was given. “God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Messiah Yeshua” (Phil 4:19). The notice that Israel “camped beside the waters” reminds us of the words of the Psalmist (Ps 23:2), “He leads me beside quite waters.” Even in the desert, there is a place of quite shalom.

How long Israel camped at Elim is not clear, but they departed from there and came to the wilderness called “Sin” (סִן), not to be confused or connected with our English word for transgressions, nor with the wilderness of Zin (זִן, Num 33:36, which is identified with Kadesh). The wilderness of Sin most likely denotes the central region of the Sinai peninsula. (The etymological similarity between “Sin” and “Sinai” seems inevitable.) A chronological note is given in Ex 16:1 regarding when Israel arrived at this third location: “...on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt.” This would mean that Israel had been on her sojourn for exactly one month since the exodus event. What may seem a short time from our perspective had doubtlessly become a long time for the nation. A month of limited provisions and water may have greatly reduced the livestock. Food provisions were becoming increasingly scarce, and the people realized that they were facing starvation in the desert. And once again they gave in to complaining. This may seem disquieting given the fact that Israel had witnessed such great miracles and compassion toward them by the Almighty. Yet it is not surprising, because hunger and the fear that one would not be able to provide for their children can drive people to actions they would never carry out in normal circumstances.

Immediately the people’s thoughts turn to comparing the bleak future (as they saw it) with the slavery they endured in Egypt. Neither option was a good one, yet in Egypt they still remained alive (for the most part). Generations had endured the heavy burden of servitude, but here, in the desert, it appeared as though the whole nation would perish. Suddenly the “meat pots” of Egypt seemed very enticing.

It is interesting to note that the people judged the motives of Moses and Aaron (16:3): “... for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” Obviously, it was not Moses and Aaron who had made the decision to leave Egypt. Nor was it their decision to lead Israel into the desert. God was the One who redeemed them from Egypt, and God was the One leading them in the desert. Here we see a tail tale sign of a lack of faith: the focus has shifted away from God to men. Surely Israel knew that God was the One Who had redeemed them from Egypt, and was leading them on their sojourn. The visible presence of God was evident in the pillar of cloud and fire. Yet when they found themselves in dire straits, they charge Moses and Aaron with malevolent motives. Faith looks to God; the flesh relies upon men.

Furthermore, the grumblings of Israel against Moses and Aaron were, in fact, grumblings against the Lord. Since the Lord had chosen Moses and Aaron, and since they were fulfilling their calling by leading the people, Israel’s grumblings were ultimately against God. Note 16:9, “...the Lord hears your grumblings which you grumble against Him. And what are we? Your grumblings are not against us but against the Lord.”

God does not immediately rebuke the people for their grumblings. Instead, He reveals to Moses His divine plan for providing them food. But again, His miraculous intervention comes as a means

for testing the faith of Israel. He will reign “bread from heaven” (לֶחֶם מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם) and give to Israel the sustenance she requires. It is this very phrase, “bread from heaven,” that is foundational for Yeshua’s own *midrash* on our text, in which the manna is a fitting illustration of His own incarnation. And in line with the giving of the manna as a test of faith for Israel, so the coming of the Messiah presents the ultimate test of faith. John 3:36— “He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son will not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him.”

The regulations given to Israel in regard to how they should gather and prepare the manna form the test of their faith/obedience. This will show “...whether or not they will walk in My instruction (בְּתוֹרָתִי).” Here, the English “instruction” is the Hebrew word “Torah,” emphasizing that Torah is instruction, not merely law or commandment. The regulations are quite straightforward: every day they were to gather enough manna for that day. They were not to gather for the next day, nor were they to keep manna from one day to the next. Moreover, on the sixth day, they were to gather twice as much as usual, so that on the seventh day they could remain in their place, and not toil to gather their food. On normal weekdays, in the evening, they would gather meat from the quail that were provided, and in the morning they were to gather manna for their bread.

As Aaron was revealing to the people God’s plan for providing them food, the glory of the Lord (*Shekinah*) appeared in the cloud (16:10). We should not think that somehow the visible presence of God had ceased at some time. Exodus 13:22 makes this clear. But note the wording of our text (16:10): “It came about as Aaron spoke to the whole congregation of the sons of Israel, that they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud.” The *Shekinah* was always present, but the people were not always looking for Him. Perhaps the constant presence of God had been taken for granted, and had slipped away from the mental consciousness of the people. At this instance, however, they turn to look out at the wilderness and once again see the pillar of cloud. God is ever with His people, but a lack of faith dulls their spiritual vision.

God’s provision of food for His people was given so that they might understand and believe in Him as *their* God, not just the God of Moses and Aaron (16:12) “... and you shall know that I am the Lord *your* God.” God brings us into times of trouble so that when He makes a way for us, our personal faith in Him increases (James 1:2–4).

So the meat (quail) comes at twilight (בֵּין הָעֶרְבִים) and the manna in the morning. This reminds us of the Pesach sacrifice that was also to be slain “at twilight (Ex 12:6),” and of the sacrifices in general that were revealed to Israel as a foreshadow of the “Bread from heaven” Who is Messiah, Yeshua. The one points to the other.

The people were instructed to gather an omer for each person in the tent (16:16). The omer here is a dry measure that is one-tenth of an ephah. The exact measure is debated, but most consider it to be roughly equivalent to what would fill a common eating bowl.

When the manna first appeared, the people looked at it and exclaimed, “What is it?” (מִן הוּא). The Hebrew word מָן (*man*) is used only in connection with the “manna” in the Tanach, but it is speculated to be an emphatic form of מָה (*mah*), meaning “what.” Thus, מָנָה, “what is it?” as a contraction of מִן הוּא. It was unlike anything the people had seen before. (Alternatively, the Hebrew could be translated “it is manna,” in which case the people recognized it as food, and Moses confirms this by his statement.) Ps 78:25 describes the manna as the “bread of mighty ones (angels)” (לֶחֶם אַבְיָרִים) and Neh 9:20 connects the manna with the Spirit: “You gave Your good Spirit to instruct them, Your manna You did not withhold from their mouth, and You gave them water for their thirst.”

The notice given in our text about what happened when the people gathered the manna is specific (16:17–18): “The sons of Israel did so, and gathered much and little. When they measured it with an omer, he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no lack; every man gathered as much as he should eat.” This does not mean that those who were lazy (gathering little) ended up with the same amount as those who gathered a full measure. What it means is that the regulation set forth by God, that each should gather an omer, was perfectly suited for each family. A tent that had only a few people had just the right amount, and tent that had many people had just enough. God’s regulations work! And wouldn’t we expect that they would? After all, He is our Creator—He knows exactly what we need.

The manna would appear each morning, and tradition has it that it would be gone by midday (b.*Yoma* 76a). God gave a far greater abundance than was needed for the nation—the provision was limitless. Everyone’s needs were met with plenty left over. We are reminded of the miracle of the loaves and fish, which, when the crowd was satisfied, bushels of leftovers were collected. The needs of God’s people never exhausts His infinite supply.

Some of the people, however, did not heed the instructions of Moses, that none was to be kept over for the next day. Those who tried to store up what they had gathered discovered that it bred worms (16:20). This teaches us that both the provision for the six days as well as the provision for the Sabbath was a miracle of God. For on the Sabbath, the double portion gathered on the sixth day remained fresh. Yet on the weekdays, any left over manna became foul. God was carefully providing the daily needs of His people. This phenomenon informs the Disciples’ Prayer: “give us the bread we need for today.” Trust in the Lord is something that must be exercised constantly. We can not expect that a “spiritual high” will last. Feeding upon the spiritual nourishment of God’s presence is the daily privilege of His people. His word is to be our daily food, His Torah our constant nourishment, His Messiah our spiritual staple.

In the same manner, the double portion of manna gathered on the sixth day evidenced a trust in God. Since manna stored up during the week became foul, it would stand to reason that some might have considered gathering twice as much on the sixth day as an exercise in futility. But those who believed what God had said obeyed, and were nourished during their Sabbath rest. God’s work was completed in six days, providing all the food the people needed. His finished work thus carried them into and through the seventh day of rest. We rest because He has completed His work.

This Sabbath principle thus came to the Israelite nation as a test, to see if they were willing to put their complete trust in God. The same test confronts us. It is not uncommon to hear that obeying the Torah stands in the way of a livelihood in our diaspora world. Since the commerce of our day seizes the seventh day as one of the most lucrative days of business, for example, it is surmised that following God’s Torah commandments simply “doesn’t work” in our modern world. But then they didn’t appear to “work” for some the Israelites either (as next week’s portion will reveal). Some went out on the Sabbath to gather manna, apparently because they didn’t believe gathering a double portion on the sixth day would work, or because they simply failed to plan ahead. Yet it is clear that those who did follow God’s commandments had their needs completely met.

Many who have determined to honor the Sabbath in our times can offer the same scenario. While humanly speaking they may have thought that honoring the Sabbath would inevitably result in lose, what they have witnessed time and again, is that honoring God by honoring the Sabbath has resulted in blessing they could have never planned, and in ways they could have never foreseen. Thus, the testing of Israel’s faith, presented to us in this *parashah*, is precisely the same

for us: will we receive God's word and live accordingly, trusting that He will provide, or will we rationalize that God's word doesn't work in our times, and try to make our own way? The crowd of faithful witnesses who have gone before us (Heb 11) stand as ample proof that trusting God and obeying His commandments is surely the path attended with His blessing.