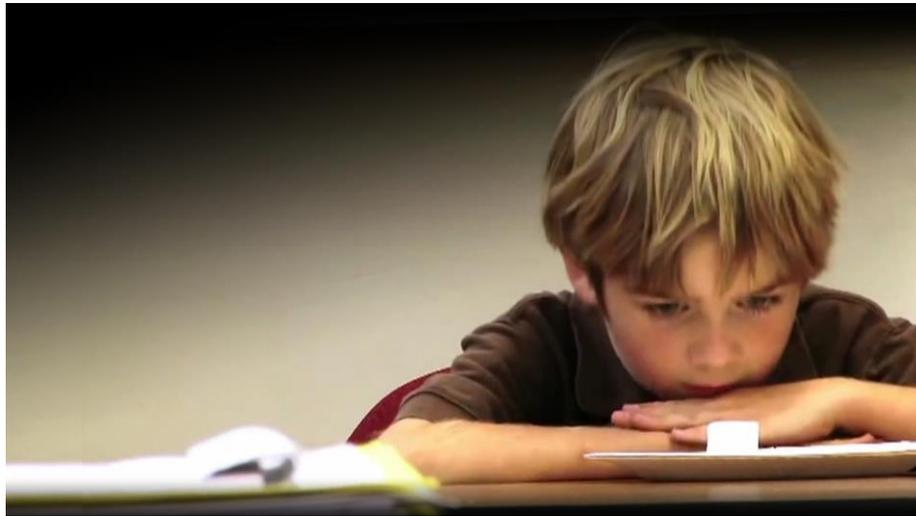


“The Parsha Discussion” by Rabbi Alex Israel

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Behaalotecha: The Marshmallow Test



As the people of Israel make their way from Sinai to Canaan they unexpectedly begin to complain and cry about the food:

“If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. Now our gullets are shrivelled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!” (11:4-6)

These longings make Egypt sound like a luxury resort, not a “house of slavery”! Did the Israelites really eat fish for free in Egypt? Was life under slavery accompanied by delicious cuisine? And was the Manna really so awful?

Nahmanides suggests that although Pharaoh gave Israel only slave rations, the Israelite slaves would forage for food in fields and garden and fish at the riverbank to supplement their food needs. Despite oppressive conditions, their food in Egypt was more varied than in the desert.

Why are they pining for their old life of slavery? Psychologists have identified what they call the “Rosy-effect”, or “Rosy-Retrospection” whereby, for example, even if a family experience a vacation full of blunders and mishaps, they frequently recall the vacation in positive terms.¹ The human capacity for nostalgia is great, but dealing with hardships of the present can be formidable.

Somehow, in the Israelites mindset, the Manna is dull and uninteresting, and they nostalgically pine for the variety of their Egyptian diet.

A CHILDISH MENTALITY

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http://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/biases/Book_Chapter_Theory_of_Temporal_Adjustments.pdf

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But another thing is at play here. The nation request “meat”, a difficult commodity to procure in the desert. Moses compares them to little children who whine and moan for something that they cannot have. God’s solution is to fulfil their request:

“The Lord will give you meat and you shall eat. You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you.” (11:18-20)

And when the quail does come:

“The people set to gathering quail all that day and night and all the next day—even he who **gathered least** had ten heads of quail...”(11:32)

In this way, God educates them. Anything will become boring after a day and a night and another day! God gives them what they want! But as happens so often, **it is the desire itself that is more alluring than actually having the object of desire.**

C.S Lewis writes:

These things—the beauty, the memory of our own past—are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have not visited.”²

The thing about the Manna is that it is precisely based upon needs and not desires. It is the inverse of the quail. It is a daily ration of food as God instructed Israel:

Gather as much of it **as requires each of you to eat, an omer to a person** Some gathered much, others little, but when they measured it ... he who had gathered much had no excess, and he who had gathered little had no deficiency: they had gathered **as much as they needed to eat.** (Ex.16:16-18)

So let’s discuss:

- Israel say about themselves: “נפשיו יבשה” translated above as “our gullets are shrivelled” but it can mean: “our souls are dry”. Was it their throats or their souls that was dry?
- Have you ever been prompted by advertising to purchase an item, only to realise, once you have it that you don’t really want it? What creates that desire within us?
- Why do we seek more food, more possessions than we need?
- Have you heard of the “Marshmallow test”? (Google it!) Why is immediate or delayed gratification for food such a test of personality?

Shabbat Shalom!

² The Weight of Glory <http://www.ucla.edu/~ras2777/spirituality/lewis.htm>