

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Behaaloscha 5768

And Moshe said: "The people in whose midst I am numbers six hundred thousand footmen, and You said, 'Meat I will give them and they will eat a month of days.' Will sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them and be enough for them, or will all the fish of the sea be gathered for them and be enough for them?" And Hashem said to Moshe: "Will the hand of Hashem be short? Now you will see if My word happens to you or not." (11:21-23)

Rashi quotes from the Midrash a dispute between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Shimon. Rabbi Akiva understands these verses literally: Moshe doubted the ability of G-d to provide meat. Rabbi Shimon says that Moshe was asking, "How can you provide all this food to the people and then kill them?" G-d answered, "Let them and a hundred like them perish, but let no one say that My hand is short and unable to provide."

Both opinions are difficult to understand. According to Rabbi Akiva, how could Moshe, the greatest prophet who ever lived, doubt G-d's ability to provide, especially after all the miracles he had witnessed? And according to Rabbi Shimon, why didn't G-d answer Moshe's prayer and provide the food without killing the people? Also, how does Rabbi Shimon's explanation fit into the words of the Torah?

The Maharal in Gur Aryeh explains that certainly, G-d could make a miracle and provide meat for the people. But G-d does not like to make changes in the order of creation, and He is angry with those who request such changes. We see this in the Gemara (Shabbos 53b) where the story is told of a man whose wife died and left him with a small nursing baby. The man had no money to hire a wet nurse. Miraculously, the man grew nipples and nursed his baby. Abaye said, "How deficient was this man! For the laws of creation were changed on his account." Similarly, in Taanis 24a we find that the son of Rabbi Yosi of Yukras was punished for making a fig tree miraculously produce fruits. In Taanis 24b Rava was punished for successfully praying

for rain during the summer. If this is true even of righteous people who request miracles, all the more so for the Israelites who complained for meat, expressing ingratitude to G-d for taking them out of Egyptian bondage and providing them with food in the desert (11:4-6).

Therefore Moshe said, "Why should you provide meat in a miraculous way, which will then result in punishment for the people for requesting a miracle? Why not provide it naturally - through gathering sheep, cattle or fish from the sea - and avoid the punishment?" G-d replied, "If I give it through natural means, they will say that My hand is short and cannot provide miraculously. Better that they should be punished and no one should doubt My power."

This is Rabbi Shimon's explanation. Rabbi Akiva, on the other hand, saw it the opposite way. G-d makes miracles in order to bestow kindness or to inflict punishment. But here, G-d had told Moshe that the people would suffer from eating the meat (v. 20), so Moshe reasoned that this was not to be a miracle; the meat would come naturally, through sheep, cattle or fish. So he said to G-d, "I do not doubt that You can make a miracle, but how can You provide so much meat through natural means?" G-d said, "Now you will see if My word happens to you or not." The word "happens" is used here to indicate that the meat would come through natural means, as if it just happened.

According to this, we could answer another question. Moshe surely warned the Israelites that they would be punished for eating the quail, as G-d had told him. Why then did the people eat? The answer is that according to Rabbi Shimon the quail came in a miraculous way, and even according to Rabbi Akiva who called it natural, it was still more miraculous than natural. When the people saw that G-d had obviously sent this flock of quail, they reasoned that He had forgiven them for their complaints, so they ate. They realized their mistake immediately, for they began to die while the meat was still stuck between their teeth (v. 33).

This story has two important lessons for our time: 1) G-d's anger is aroused when the wicked request

miracles; 2) When the wicked do receive their miracles or near-miracles, many good people mistakenly think that this means that G-d is no longer angry and will not punish them.

There is one important difference between then and now. When the Jews were in the wilderness, G-d dealt with them openly, not hiding His face, so the punishment came right away, while the meat was still between their teeth. Today, however, we live in an era when G-d's presence is hidden, and His actions are harder to discern. This unfortunately adds to the confusion even more. (Al Hageulah V'al Hatemurah, Chapter 27)

Those who do not have e-mail can now receive this sheet free every week by regular mail. To order write to the address below.



True Torah Jews
183 Wilson St. PMB 162
Brooklyn, NY 11211

For additional copies of this publication,
or to sponsor an issue,
PLEASE CALL 718-841-7053.