

# PARSHAS BESHALACH - ELEVENTH HOUR REPRIEVES, AND BEYOND

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## Eleventh Hour Reprieves, and Beyond

*If you listen diligently to the voice of Hashem...then any of the diseases that I placed in Egypt, I will not place upon you, for I am Hashem your healer. They arrived at Eilim. There, there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms[1].*

Diseases? Finding themselves in a wilderness with limited food supply and no water, the Bnei Yisrael were in need of a supermarket, not a medical clinic. Disappointed by the bitter waters at Marah, HKBH had bailed them out with a bottom-of-the-ninth miraculous save. They must have been very relieved, and very appreciative. Why, thought, did Hashem's retrospective on Marah speak about preventing disease, rather than finding a square meal?

The quality of our parnasah is predicated upon avodah, period[2]. Our material needs are dependant upon our service of Hashem through korbanos, and by extension, through prayer. Marah was not the place to teach the Bnei Yisrael about the place and function of everyday avodah. They were many years away from establishing the early precursors of the Batei Mikdosh in Shiloh, Nov, and Gilgal. There, after the mon that sustained them for the decades in the wilderness became just a distant memory, Klal Yisrael would practice in earnest the art of avodah linked to their material well-being.

A different educational goal was in reach, and HKBH focused on that, rather than on avodah. Torah study brings with it its own promise: security. This is the reason that Torah is called[3] a mishmeres/guarding. Torah guards and protects against any harm that might befall us. Often, however, it doesn't show its protective properties until our backs are against the wall.

The Torah addresses here those who had just slaked their thirst through the miraculous waters of Marah. It does not tell them that water, as well as all else they needed, would come to them in the merit of their korbanos and davening. The full meaning of that lesson would be deferred for a few generations. At the time of our parshah, the exhortations they needed to hear concerned Torah study, and its attendant promise of protection - including last-minute protection. The waters of Marah remained bitter till the eleventh hour, even after the Bnei Yisrael justifiably clamored for their sustenance. They were saved only after going the distance, after waiting to the very end. Hashem's

assistance came, but not immediately. As so often happens, His protective salvation comes precisely when people give up all ordinary hope.

The water that was given to them was not water they merited through their daily avodah. It was not part of a parnasah-provision plan, but part of a medical package. Life-threatening thirst and famine are also "diseases." Moreover, they are diseases that had been visited upon the Egyptians. After the plague of blood, the Egyptians grew deathly ill from lack of water; they suffered the symptoms of food deprivation after the makah of borod destroyed their food supply. Hashem promises the Bnei Yisrael that even if they lacked parnasah, He would extricate them from the illness of deprivation, although often only at the last moment, if they applied themselves to limud Torah.

Another message, a corollary of the first, came folded into the lesson of Marah. The water they wanted did not come at the time and in the manner the Bnei Yisrael would have wanted. They first had to endure some privation, some doing without. This is included in the mishnah's<sup>[4]</sup> description of Torah: "You will eat bread with salt. The water you drink will be measured. You will sleep on the ground...This is the way of Torah." In other words, the life of learning demands sacrifice - but it comes with a security not enjoyed by others. To those willing to forego comfort and luxury, it will provide a liveable sustenance - plus Divine intercession to prevent disaster.

Neither the story nor the lesson ends here. The very next stop in Bnei Yisrael's journey took them to Eilim, described as a place of twelve springs and seventy date-palms. While potable water had to be miraculously wrung out of Marah, at Eilim it was available in abundance and luxury. This is the other side of the coin. It is simply not true that the Torah life-style demands poverty. It is only the "derech/way, path of Torah" that requires simplicity and self-denial. To gain access to Torah, people must be willing and able to give up other wishes and desires. Once Torah becomes part of a person, the Torah wishes for him to enjoy abundance and blessing. To the Torah personality, these gifts will not mire him in materialism, adding drag to his further progress. To the contrary, they broaden his mind and deepen his understanding, allowing more insight into the beauty of the Torah and the beauty of Hashem's creation.

Bnei Yisrael, still weeks away from kabbolas ha-Torah, had to be taught that Torah demands sacrifice. Thus, the lesson of Marah was truly bittersweet. Almost immediately, however, Hashem followed up with a diametrically opposed lesson. On the horizon beyond Sinai was Hashem's approval of blessing and abundance, which would come to a nation steeped in Torah, provided in the merit of its twelve shevatim and seventy elders.

These ideas were crucial in molding the thinking of the new nation, and Hashem lost no time in conveying them. Their relevance, however, is for all times.

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1. Based on Ha'amek Davar, Shemos 15:26-27

2. This idea frequently revisited by the Netziv. See, e.g., my shiur on Parshas Vayitzei
  3. Bereishis 26:5
  4. Avos 6:4
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