

# PARNASAH: WHEREIN THE TOIL?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

A famous and oft-cited Gemara compares earning a living to an event in this week's parsha:

*R. Shizvi said in the name of R. Eleazar ben Azariah: A man's sustenance is as difficult as the dividing of the Red Sea. It is written (Tehillim/Psalms 136:25), "He gives food to all flesh," preceded by, "[Give praise] to He who divided the Red Sea in pieces." (Pesachim 118a)*

In what way is providing for man as "difficult" as splitting the sea? In fact, what is difficult about splitting the sea? Not to say that it's something you or I do with regularity, but we are talking here about the Almighty. He made the rules; it stands to reason that He can adjust them or override them as He sees fit.

R' Chaim Shmuelewitz zt"l asked: How is it possible that of all the Jews, only Nachshon ben Aminadav jumped into the sea?

He answers that if Hashem would have told the Jews the time had come to sacrifice their lives to sanctify G-d's name, many of them would have done so, perhaps all of them. But they were not meant to die. The mitzvah was to jump into the sea, and believe nothing would happen, despite what seemed like insurmountable odds. This pure faith was a quality only Nachshon possessed.

Mefarshim grapple with his answer. Were Moshe and Aaron not up to the task? Was Yehoshua Ben Nun not capable of 'throwing' himself into the task and relying on Hashem's promise?

*The same Gemara compares man's sustenance (parnasah) with childbirth: R. Yochanan said: Man's sustenance is twice as difficult as a woman in childbirth. For of a woman in childbirth it is written, "in pain (be-etzev) you will bring forth children," whereas of sustenance it is written, "in toil (be-itzabon [plural]) you shall eat."*

Notwithstanding the indignation of those who have gone through the latter of the two, what is noteworthy is that this Gemara uses the identical wording as the previous Gemara which compared parnassa to splitting the sea - "kashin, it is difficult" -- despite the fact that this Gemara refers to our difficulties and suffering (ergo the comparison to childbirth), whereas the previous one apparently refers to Hashem's 'difficulty,' i.e. the greatness of the miracle.

Perhaps, in fact, both Gemaras refer to man's efforts.

There is yet another Gemara (Shabbos 53b):

*Our Rabbis taught: A man's wife died and left a child to be nursed, yet he could not afford to pay a wet nurse. A miracle occurred and he was able to suckle his son... R. Yehuda said: "Come and see how difficult man's sustenance is, that the order of Creation had to be altered for him! R. Nachman said: The proof is that while miracles occur, food is [rarely] created miraculously.*

Why do miracles occur more readily for other circumstances than in order to provide man with parnasah?

When Adam was punished after partaking from the Tree of Life, he was told earning a living would no longer be easy. "With toil you will eat your bread."

Be'itzavon, with toil, also connotes sadness and worry. In being kicked out of Gan Eden, Adam not only lost his meal ticket; he was also being cast off from before Hashem. In Gan Eden, not only did things come easy; it was also easy to remember from Whom they came. Just as there were no doubts as to whether the fruits of the Garden would suffice, so too there were no doubts as to whether Hashem would take care of Adam. Hashem's presence was tangible; there was no 'Hidden Face' in the Garden of Eden.

The curse of eating bread "by the sweat of your brow," means that we'll have to work hard to earn a living. But it also means we will be naturally inclined to believe we are responsible for making things happen; we take credit for our successes and blame ourselves for our failures. With regard to parnasah, it will be exceedingly difficult to bring Hashem into the picture.

Think about it like this: We know that we play a big role in our own health; by eating the right foods, exercising, not smoking etc. Yet when a person G-d forbid gets sick, even a person who could rightly say they are at least partially to blame, you don't see them beating up on themselves the way a person who lost money does. Conversely, even those who take good care of their bodies don't engage in back-patting to nearly the same degree as people who have succeeded in the world of finance.

In both cases, we would rationally agree that good health and good wealth are to some extent dependent on our efforts, but to a greater extent depend on the grace of Hashem. Yet somehow it's relatively easy to internalize this with regard to health, and impossibly difficult to remember with regard to wealth. This is the curse of "be'itzavon, with worry you will eat."

This is why the Gemara says Hashem doesn't [normally] perform miracles with regard to parnasah; it defeats the purpose. The whole concept of parnasah was that it should come with worry. It was an extension of being thrown out of Gan Eden and cast away from Hashem's presence. Hashem, of course, is still there for us pulling the strings, but feeling His influence in this area is harder than in all

others.

Nachson Ben Aminadav had to overcome his fear of death and place his trust in Hashem. Moshe and Aaron could not have done what he did because of their extreme closeness to Hashem as His prophets. For them, jumping into the raging waters would not have demonstrated the raw faith against-all-odds that Nachshon's actions did. Only he could 'split the sea' with his faith. The two Gemaras in Pesachim, which compare parnasah to splitting the Red Sea and to childbirth both refer to the difficulties of man. It is as difficult for us to believe our parnasah is in the hands of Hashem as it was for the Jews, at the edges of the raging sea, to believe no harm would become them, and jump into the sea. The struggle is majestic; hopefully we can find the spark of Nachson within us. Have a good Shabbos. Text Copyright &copy 2008 by [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Torah.org](#)**