

# APPRECIATION IN TIMES OF PAIN

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

The people of Israel had a charmed existence in their life in the desert. Unlike us, their descendants, they did not face economic downturns or long lines waiting at the supermarket checkout counter. Their food was delivered to them daily (for the righteous at their doorstep) and a magical well of Miriam sustained their needs for water without bills and taxes and surcharges.

The great clouds of honor protected them from heat and the sun and their clothing was miraculously laundered and cleaned for them. It was the idyllic life. But apparently it wasn't. The rest of the Torah, including this week's parsha, is replete with repeated complaints about the food, the water, about everything, about life itself.

Their memories of Egypt become fonder and fonder and their ingratitude towards Moshe and God reaches startling proportions. Moshe, the redeemer of Israel and their unquestionably revered leader, is heard to say to God in this week's parsha that he feels his life endangered by the murmurings of dissatisfaction of the people against God and him. "Soon they will stone me," he states.

What happened to their belief in "God and in Moshe, His servant?" How did it occur that they could complain about the marvelous situation of security and freedom in which they now found themselves? How can they proclaim that they want to return to Egypt, the country of their oppression and persecution? These questions are very disturbing ones and all of the great Jewish commentators to the Torah have attempted to deal with them.

Though each of the commentators offers a differently nuanced answer to these questions there is a common thread that runs through all of their words and ideas. And that is that human beings are basically dissatisfied creatures. The rabbis taught us that he who has one hundred (million, billion, trillion?) always wishes for two hundred!

The rabbis, therefore, defined wealth in terms of personal satisfaction and gratitude and they ruefully remarked that there are rather few wealthy people present in our world. "Most of the world is poor," they declaimed and they were not speaking of material artificially and statically arrived at poverty lines. In fact, the largesse and ease poured unto our ancestors as they left Egypt was meant to teach them that no amount of material well being would ever be enough for them.

There had to be another dimension that had to enter their lives and beings. And that was an intangible one of spirit and holy purpose, of Godly behavior and gratitude for life itself. It was

represented by the Torah that they would receive and accept at Mount Sinai fifty days after their liberation from Egyptian slavery.

For fifty days their ingratitude would be forgivable for they had no other insight into life except the always unsatisfactory material one. After receiving the Torah at Sinai they would now be held to a higher standard of appreciation and thankfulness.

That has been the secret of Jewish resilience and survival throughout many a very bleak physical time. It remains valid and true for our current time as well.

Shabat shalom.

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