

# PARSHAS BEHAALOSCHA - THE LITTLE COMMITTEE THAT COULD

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

## The Little Committee That Could<sup>1</sup>

How could it be understood, other than a complete repudiation of his message? To Moshe, the people's fond reminiscences of freely obtained garlic and onions signaled failure of his mission. Hashem had entrusted him not only to give Bnei Yisrael the Torah, but to shape them into a nation that cherished the highest ideals. Instead, they waited in front of their tents for a menu change. "We remember the fish that we ate freely in Egypt...the leeks and the onions and the garlic[2]."

Moreover, there did not appear to be any way out. Moshe had complete faith and confidence in Hashem's ability to perform miracles, but the demands of the people were disappointing and inappropriate. They were hardly in the kind of crisis that Hashem would respond to with miraculous intervention. If the people were to be placated, the meat they sought would have to come from natural sources. Where was he to find a supply of meat for the sizeable population of the Jewish travelers through the wilderness?

To make matters worse, Moshe was nagged by his recollection of the beginning of his public service career. When Hashem had first called upon him at the burning bush and asked him to argue the people's cause in front of Paroh, Moshe had demurred. For an entire week according to Chazal he attempted to persuade G-d to look elsewhere for His human spokesman. Moshe would gladly have suffered any shame and any harm, if it would better the condition of the Jewish people. But he believed that he was unqualified for the job, and implored G-d to choose an alternative. Nothing could disqualify a candidate for leadership more than self-doubt in his own abilities. It was a recipe for failure - and he had now been proven correct!

"Why have You so afflicted Your servant; why have I not found favor in Your eyes[3]?" Why had he found so little favor in Hashem's eyes that He had spurned Moshe's most reasonable request? How could he possibly have succeeded? "Did I conceive this entire people, or did I bear them[4]?" When parents fall short of their goals, their failures are offset by the bonds of love and respect that children have for them. Those can compensate for less than perfect parental performance. But Moshe was not their parent. Love and respect were not available as a kind of instinct. Obviously, he thought, he hadn't earned it either, or they would not be asking trivial and impossible things of him. Their crying for meat mocked him as a failure.

Hashem's response to Moshe was not instantly reassuring. "Gather unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel[5]." What purpose could be served by surrounding Moshe with a committee of seventy elders? Surely, Moshe thought, the immediate purpose of their appointment was to address the practical issue at hand. What benefit was there in seventy-one people contemplating an impossible situation, rather than Moshe alone? "Six hundred thousand ...people, and You say that I should give them meat that they should eat for a month[6]!"

G-d amplified upon His earlier statement that there would be more than ample meat. Moshe had understood that to mean that it would be available through natural means, since Hashem would surely not work miracles for such a small-minded request. "Will the Hand of Hashem be insufficient? Now you will see whether My Word will happen to you or not[7]." There are far more opportunities than you realize for My Will to be accomplished even within the limitations of the natural world the fulfillment of My Word can occur in ways that humans will never anticipate - even without overt miracles! No one could have anticipated the "fortuitous" gathering of quail for the people to collect. Yet the laws of nature did not have to be overturned to satisfy their craving for meat.

HKBH showed that He was in full control of the laws of nature not only in breaking them at will, as He did at the time of the Exodus, but in squeezing unexpected results from them when that was what He desired. What, then, was the role of the elders? The election of the seventy zekeinim did not seem to play a role in the timely arrival of flocks of birds.

We should pause and consider that the seventy zekeinim became the prototype for the Sanhedrin that would guide and direct the nation in all exigencies of history, in good times and in troubled ones. Long after the death of Moshe, such batei din would bring the Word of G-d to the people in situations that would seem hopeless and impossible. They would need firm resolve to stand by Hashem's expectations, even where conditions would seem unfavorable for those expectations to be realized.

This first crisis faced by the Sanhedrin as the ultimate source of human guidance set the stage for the future activities of the elders of all generations. They do not always need to see in advance how a problem would be solved. They need to determine the right course of action, and have confidence that Hashem would provide practical solutions that human beings could not conjure up on their own.

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1. Based on the Hirsch Chumash, Bamidbar 11:11-13, 21-23
  2. Bamidbar 11:5
  3. Bamidbar 11:11
  4. Bamidbar 11:12
  5. Bamidbar 11:16
  6. Bamidbar 11:21
  7. Bamidbar 11:23

