



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Behalotecha

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Behalotecha

Free Fish or Free Love?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Jews like free things. Or so goes the stereotype. Legend has it that when God offered the Israelites the tablets, they inquired as to the cost? When they heard the word *free*, they said, “We’ll take two!”

Besides liking free things, Jews like to kvetch. Another stereotype. As soon as they began traveling in the desert, they started to complain. In fact, they started to kvetch about free things: *We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge...*

This was obvious chutzpah. After all, God had just taken them out of Egypt, handed them the blueprint to all of existence, the Torah, and all they did was complain. They sounded like a bunch of spoiled brats, a nation of obnoxious, misbehaving, entitled children demanding ... fish, of all things.

But the Talmud says it wasn’t really fish they were talking about. “Fish” is a euphemism for promiscuity or intimacy...

Huh? What? Come again?

As we examine this puzzling complaint of the Israelites recorded in this week’s Torah reading, we will find the answer to the question that every Jew asks one time or another: “Why can’t I just live my humble life ‘free of charge,’ without commitment or attachment? Why do I have to carry this burden of Torah and mitzvos?”

Hint: Because, anything that does not involve a mitzvah is like a marriage without commitment – i.e. “meaningless.”

FREE FISH OR FREE LOVE?

1. The Price Tag (Joke)

#1

A businessman boarded a plane to find, sitting next to him, an elegant woman wearing the largest, most stunning diamond ring he had ever seen. He asked her about it.

"This is the Klopman diamond," she said. "It is beautiful but, like the Hope diamond, it has a terrible curse attached to it."

"What is the curse?" the man asked.

"Mr. Klopman."

#2

A little boy asked his father, "Daddy, how much does it cost to get married?"

And the father replied, "I don't know, son, I'm still paying for it."

2. Free Things

Jews like free things. We know this. Legend has it that when God offered the Israelites the tablets, they inquired as to the cost? When they heard the word free, they said, "We'll take two!"

Some would say that nothing in life is really free – not free love, not free food, not free education – and that receiving a free thing is never good.

Does not the Klopman diamond come with the burden of Mr. Klopman?
Does not the sanctity of marriage come with the price of commitment and exclusivity?

Is it better to be committed to something (or someone) or to be free of all commitments? Do we work so that we can one day be free of all responsibilities, or is responsibility part of freedom?

These are the questions we will ponder today as we delve into the meaning of this week's Torah reading.

3. File Your Complaint

After receiving the Ten Commandments at Sinai (which we just celebrated on the Holiday of Shavuot) and spending a year downloading the Torah in its entirety, the Jewish people began their desert journey to the Promised Land.

This week's Torah reading, *Parshat Behalotecha*, describes the beginnings of the journey, and it was done in inimitable Jewish fashion – amid endless kvetching. As soon as they hit the road, the Jews begin to moan and groan to Moses about how difficult life was in the desert.

The people were looking to complain, and it was evil in the ears of the Lord. The Lord heard and His anger flared, and a fire from the Lord burned among them, consuming the extremes of the camp. The people cried out to Moses; Moses prayed to the Lord, and the fire died down... But the mixed multitude among them began to have strong cravings. Then even the children of Israel once again began to cry, and they said, "Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge..."¹

Just to put it into context. Imagine you are extracted from harsh slavery and all your foes are vanquished. Next you are taken to a blooming mountain where you are handed the secrets to all of existence. Then you begin a journey to a place where all your dreams will come true, the Promised Land.

One would think such a journey, however challenging, would be full of joy and wonder, full of excitement and anticipation. But no, as soon as the Jews set out on their trek, they begin to kvetch and cry.

¹ Numbers 11:1-5.

This was obvious chutzpah. After all, God had just taken them out of Egypt, hand-gifted them the blueprint to all of existence, the Torah, and they had the temerity to complain? And about what? Instead of bemoaning the lack of Bloomingdales in the desert, or the void of good kosher restaurants in the wilderness, they began to whine about the fish they ate in Egypt free of charge. I mean, how good could that Nile carp have been?

But was it fish they were really talking about?

4. A Talmudic Debate

The Talmud records a great debate² between Rav and Shmuel on this very subject. Rav maintains that when they said, *We remember the fish we ate in Egypt free of charge* they were in fact missing that Nile carp. Shmuel, however, says that the word “fish” is a euphemism for promiscuity.

Proof that fish may refer to intimate relations may be found toward the end of the Book of Genesis, where Jacob blesses the sons of Joseph to “multiply abundantly like fish.”³

Which means, that instead of reading the verse, *We remember the fish we ate in Egypt free of charge*, we could read it, *We remember the intimacy/sex we had in Egypt free of charge*.

But this raises oh so many questions:

- First of all, why – whether it’s fish or promiscuity – were they missing anything at all about the brutal slavery they had endured?
- If it was promiscuity, what self-respecting individual wouldn’t be embarrassed to bring up his past exploits before God?
- And how was it free of charge? They were slaves, so nothing to them was free of charge!

² Yuma 75a.

³ Genesis 48:16.

5. Free of Charge

To help us wrap our minds around this baffling matter, let us examine what this term “free of charge” – *chinam* in Hebrew – actually means.

The 11th century Torah commentator, Rashi, quotes the Midrash:

If you say that the Egyptians gave them fish free of charge, how do you explain [that the Egyptians said to them:] “*Straw shall NOT be given to you*”⁴? Now if straw was not given free of charge, could fish have been given to them free of charge? [Clearly not.] So what does “free of charge” really mean? [Answers the Midrash:] Free from the burden of mitzvahs.⁵

The Zohar, the seminal work of Jewish mysticism, says something similar:

When they ate in Egypt free of charge, it means it was without a blessing on the food. Why? Because slaves are not responsible for the demands and yokes of heaven. Since slaves are already burdened by the demands and yokes of their slavery, they cannot also be obligated by the yokes of the Heavenly Master. And thus the fish in Egypt was eaten without a blessing.⁶

This explanation suggests that the Jewish people were moaning to Moses: “Oy, what we would give to return to Egypt, when we didn’t have to bless the food before eating it and every act we did was free from the burden of the mitzvahs.” Or alternatively, “Oy, we remember those times in Egypt when intimacy was devoid of commitment and love was free, without attachments and demands.”

The Jews could not stand this mitzvah thing! As Jews everywhere today and throughout history, the Jews back then complained about the commitments that the Torah and its commandments places upon the Nation of Israel. In effect, they were saying, “Why can’t we be with whomever we want to be? Why can’t we eat whatever we want to eat?”

⁴ Exodus 5:18.

⁵ Sifrei, Behalotcha 1:42:5. See also Devarim Rabba 1:11.

⁶ Zohar III 108a.

Take us back to Egypt, where promiscuity was normal and our diets were free of divine regulation.”

6. Very Strange

Now this is very strange.

It may make sense *today* to question the commandments of the Torah and their relevance. I mean, *today* God is concealed and we don't understand the deeper meaning of many of the rituals. So yes, because today there is no blatant divine revelation in the world and it is the norm to eat whatever you want to eat and sleep with whomever you want to sleep, it is somewhat understandable for a Jew to question these things as well. If a Jew grows up in a world that knows no better, than this might be his or her norm.

But *back then*, when the Jewish people complained about these things, it was literally a few days after Sinai, where they had spent the greater part of a year studying and internalizing the entire Torah. How is it possible then that they should desire a return to a land as spiritually corrupt and materialistic as Egypt?

Why would the Jews want to revert to a reality that did not require a blessing on food and one that allowed promiscuous relationships?

Unlike today, *back then* was a time of divine revelation!

7. Concealed and Revealed⁷

As with all things Jewish, there is way more here than meets the eye.

So let's look under the surface. Let's go fishing. And, as we do, we will come to understand the connection between fish and intimacy.

⁷ For the following, and for this entire sermon in general, see Tzemach Tzedek, Ohr Hatorah, Behalotcha p. 384-6.

According to Kabbalah, everything in this physical world stems from a spiritual source and it takes on the characteristics of its spiritual origin. Thus, every physical item in this material world is (also) a metaphor for something spiritual and a representation of its spiritual source.

Fish represent the hidden worlds, called *alma d'iskasya*. While everything on earth is revealed for all to see, everything in the sea is concealed from the naked eye. Thus fish, citizens of the concealing waters, are symbolic of the hidden worlds.

The hidden worlds, *spiritually* speaking, are everything the material eye cannot perceive. This is a simplification but it does not make it less true. Whatever we see in this world is but a surface, a façade, the outermost layer of true existence. Beneath it are many other worlds and many energies that make this world go round. These are the forces of *alma d'iskasya*.

Back in Egypt, before the Torah was given at Sinai, all the energies of the world flowed “free of charge,” *chinam*. There was no commitment to bless food or to love someone. The hidden world of *alma d'ikasya* energized and empowered the revealed world of “free of charge” and that was that. Humans were essentially slaves to the world and all were free of commitment. The hidden remained hidden and the revealed was all that people knew. Sure it was limited, but, hey, it was free!

Ah, but then came this event – an event we just celebrated a few days ago on Shavuot – when humanity acquired the power to be profound. Now, by performing a simple mitzvah – making a short blessing, for example – we can take this revealed world and show its true hidden depth. Now, after Sinai, the concealed worlds can be unleashed and turn this limited carnal world into an unlimited home for the Divine.

¹¹ Leviticus 21:12.

¹² Though the legal status of *nazirut* is not for most people, and is not (completely) applicable today (when we don't have the Temple), its spiritual lessons are relevant to all of us at all times.

¹³ See Nazir 62a, Chagigah 10a.

8. One Problem

There is but one problem. With this ability comes much commitment.

To take the sensitive and raw and innocent source energies of the hidden worlds and have them revealed in this here material world, much structure and responsibility and maturity and selflessness it required.

And so, intimacy is no longer some one-night casual fling. Now, intimacy is a consecrated union between man and wife, can take place only within the sanctity of marriage and is subject to all the many laws of family purity. Now, no longer is consuming fish (or anything else) a “free of charge” experience, without making a blessing or obeying laws of keeping kosher.

Following the giving of the Torah at Sinai, when the Jewish people began to travel in the wilderness, they realized, “Uh oh, what the hell did we get ourselves into? With great freedom comes great responsibility! No longer can we just eat anything we like for now everything we consume must be elevated to a higher level.” So they would rather have returned to Egypt where, though it was slavery, at least they could consume whatever they liked “free of charge,” without expectations, consequences, or ramifications. It was so much easier than being burdened with the yoke of changing the world.

9. Fish and Intimacy

The connection between fish and intimacy now becomes more clear. Fish represent the concealed layers of existence. And intimacy is the single act that has the ability to take the most concealed elements of life and make them the most real.

Love, intimacy, relationship, marriage – whatever word you want to use for it – is the ability to take intangibles and make them tangible ... to take the unknown and make it known ... to take the sacred and give it substance.

But this can only happen in one way and one way alone – the way God commanded it to happen. And if this is the case with intimacy, the most essential of all human actions, then how much more so with any other human action, from the more basic act of eating to the more enlightened one of, say, writing. All actions must accord with the Will of Heaven. For this is the only way to reveal *alma d'iskasya* in this world.

The people in the desert understood this. And they understood how monumental and challenging such a task is. And, thus, they bewailed an easier time. They beseeched Moses: “Why can we not go back to our previous reality, where all things were safe. Sure, our relationships were shallow, but at least there was no real heartbreak or hurtful tears. Why can’t we go back to a life free of charge?”

10. Moses’ Reaction

And Moses, being the leader that he was, took these complaints back to God, adding some complaints of his own:

*Did I conceive this entire people? Did I give birth to them, that You [God] say to me, “Carry them in your bosom as the nurse carries the suckling,” to the Land You promised their forefathers?*⁸

Moses was actually telling God: Perhaps, You don’t understand how difficult of a task you have placed before us. Turning the deepest secrets into physical home for the Divine is not a simple thing. These people need help!

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Assemble for Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the people’s elders and officers...I will come down and speak with you there, and I will increase the spirit that is upon you and bestow it upon them. Then they will bear the burden of the people with you so that you need not bear it alone. And to the people, you shall say, ‘Prepare yourselves for tomorrow and you shall eat meat,

⁸ Numbers 11:12.

because you have cried in the ears of the Lord saying, "Who will feed us meat, for we had it better in Egypt." [Therefore,] the Lord will give you meat, and you shall eat.'"⁹

God agreed that making His divine reality the norm on this physical plane is the most difficult task in all of existence, but He also said, "Hey I am here and I shall provide the resources required. Going back to Egypt is not an option. There is no turning back. But I can help provide the tools to help you move forward."

11. Personal Lesson

And that brings us to the personal lesson in all of this.

We all sometimes bemoan the past where we had no commitments and all was "free of charge." Whether it really was that way or not is a different question,¹⁰ but we definitely think it was that way.

Being a Jew, whether we like it or not, means taking the deepest secrets of existence – *alma d'iskasya* – and making them the reality for all to see. This happens every time we do a mitzvah, make a blessing, and act in a pure and refined way. Sure it's difficult. Sure it's a commitment. Sure it's the opposite of "free of charge."

But it's the opposite of "free of charge" the same way a diamond is the opposite of "free of charge" – it's opposite because its valuable and worth it.

The reason things in Egypt cost nothing was because the results were worthless. Things that cost nothing – be it in effort, commitment, time, or money – also produce nothing.

⁹ Numbers 16-18

¹⁰ See commentaires on Midrash Rabba ibid.

Yes, there are times we desire perpetual vacations from the responsibilities of life until we remember that we are here for the deepest of purposes ... that with every mitzvah, we are uniting the hidden source of all things with the revealed realization of its being.

If you ever find yourself asking, "Hey, I just want to live my life without any burden, yoke, or commitment – is that so bad?" then just remind yourself of your vast and infinite potential.

Imagine a top athlete saying: "You know, I really just want to go back to that time when I was not such a skilled player and performed on a level lower than my actual ability." No top athlete would ever say that.

Or imagine a CEO of a company saying: "You know, we could be making billions of dollars in profits, but the hassle that comes along with it is too great, so let's just break even." No sane CEO would ever talk like that.

If we Jews remember our boundless potential and ability – to reveal the Divine in this world through Torah and its mitzvahs – we will never desire to be "free of charge." Even for free!

12. Conclusion: Free Advice

On their fiftieth wedding anniversary and during the dinner celebrating it, Byron was asked to give his friends a brief account of the benefits of a marriage of such long duration.

"Tell us Byron, just what is it you have learned from all those wonderful years with your wife?"

Byron responded, 'Well, I've learned that marriage is the best teacher of all. It teaches you loyalty, forbearance, meekness, self-restraint, forgiveness and a great many other qualities you wouldn't have needed if you'd stayed single.'

It is very true that because of Sinai, the Jewish responsibility is immense. But so are the results. And deep down, we are all grateful and proud of our mission in this world.

Would you rather be a sunbather all your life or a CEO? The sunbather has no responsibility, while the CEO has no respite. Would you rather remain single, going from one shallow relationship to another, or would you rather get married? The single person has no commitments while the married person has nothing but commitments.

To reveal the hidden, to recognize true depth, you must commit, you must pay the price. To live and love on the surface is pretty much “free of charge.” This is a specialty of Egypt. To live and love in the depths is worth every ounce of energy and every dime you have.

Sure, there are times when we all bewail and bemoan the past, when things were easy, free of charge, and without responsibility. And there’s nothing wrong with that, for that reminiscing forces us to create infrastructures and systems to implement the lofty ideals we have been entrusted with.

At the heart of it, Jews do not like free things. How’s that for a stereotype buster?

Shabbat Shalom!