

Gratitude from the Torah

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Beha'alotcha

How Can We Learn Positivity and Total Trust from the Israelites' Desert Complaint?

What are the Three Human Weaknesses that Cause Ungratefulness?

I notice three Human Nature weaknesses through which we all are easily led astray into ungratefulness. The first is our tendency to notice the negative constantly, the second is our unsatisfiable desire for more no matter how much we already have, and the third is our worries that we may lose what we have. How do these underlying principles of ingratitude play out in our lives? Hmm. When people visit, I can't understand why they always rave about my garden. All I see are a few occasional flowers hidden in all the weeds I didn't get to. I also discern all the withering leaves and all the plants that are struggling. I furthermore sadly recall all those plants that died for various reasons. When I visit my friends' gardens – I'm truly impressed – wishing my garden would be even just a fraction as lush, vibrant, and colorful. Due to this tendency to view what belongs to myself in a negative light, I don't wear the glasses I'm supposed to wear except for when I'm driving or going out to watch a show, both of which I rarely do these days. If I were to wear my glasses at home, I would constantly notice the dirty spots on my ceramic floor, kitchen counter, and cabinets. No matter how much I would try to clean, everything would become dirty again quicker than I could wipe the spots away. We all go through life wearing dirt-colored glasses, continually noticing the negative, but it is not always as easy to remove these glasses as it is for me to avoid wearing mine. Regarding the second human weakness, today the scent of my husband grilling the Shabbat chicken made me feel such a craving to dig into that juicy piece on a Friday morning that it took great effort to pull myself away. When my husband offered me a mini piece to taste I had to recline, knowing that this little chicken crump that had come apart from the thigh was only going egg my appetite, and it would be hard not to gobble up the full piece reserved for Shabbat. I suffer much from the third weakness of worry. What's gonna be? what's gonna be? In a day and age when so many couples get divorced, what if that would happen to my newlywed son, G-d forbid? How could we ever bear it? Will we have new students for the summer program? How will the midrasha continue when someday I will need to retire? These kinds of worries distract me from appreciating what is.

Craving a Craving for More and More

The Israelites in the desert fell prey to these human weaknesses and thus displayed the utmost ingratitude. Although, the manna would taste almost like everything you imagined (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 75a), the Israelites exposed their desire for more and more:

ספר במדבר פרק יא פסוק ד והאספסוף אשר בקרבם התאוה וישבו ויבכו גם בני ישראל ויאמרו מי יאכלנו בשר:

“But the 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?” (*Bamidbar* 11:4).

The Hebrew literally reads **התאוה תאוה** /*hitavu ta'avah* – ‘they craved a craving.’ This implied that they objected to their spiritual lifestyle of being nursed directly by the Divine. The sacred manna, completely absorbed into their bodies without any waste whatsoever (Babylonian Talmud, *Yoma* 75b), was too ethereal for them. You could never overeat or binge on manna. It was angelic food. They craved an earthy life of roast beef and potatoes that would saturate their body with that heavy feeling

of having overeaten. Rashi explains that the Israelites indeed did have meat, but they were looking for a pretext to complain even if their craving was unbounded: WHO WILL FEED US MEAT? - Did they not have meat? Does it not say, "Also a great mixed multitude went up with them, and flocks and cattle" (*Shemot* 12:38)? You might argue that they had already eaten them. But when they were about to enter the Land, is it not written that "the children of Reuven had much cattle" (*Bamidbar* 32:1)? The answer is that they were seeking a pretext [*Sifrei Beha'alothecha* 1:42:4]; (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:4). Although our students are generally of the most spiritual caliber and would give anything for a taste of manna, occasionally we do have students who feel the need for a break to get away from spiritual Bat Ayin and submerge themselves in secular Tel Aviv.

Belittling the Sacred Manna – the Most Valuable Divine Gift

The Manna was the Israelites' spiritual barometer and came to the doorstep of the person deserving it. Otherwise, according to the severity of sin, one would have to go further away to collect his daily portion of manna. Rather than appreciating the bread from heaven, the people spoke degradingly of the superior manna Hashem had provided:

סַפֵּר בַּמִּדְבָּר פֶּרֶק יֵא פֶסוּק ה זְכַרְנוּ אֶת הַדָּגָה אֲשֶׁר נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם חֲנָם אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים וְאֶת הָאֲבֹטְחוֹת וְאֶת הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת הַבְּצָלִים וְאֶת הַשּׁוּמִיּוֹת: (ו) וְעַתָּה נִפְשָׁנוּ יִבְשָׁה אֵין כָּל בְּלִתֵּי אֶל הַמָּן עֵינֵינוּ:
 "We remember the fish we ate in Egypt free of charge, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. But now we have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (*Bamidbar* 11:5-6).

Living such spiritual lives is obligating. As Rashi explains, the Egyptians didn't give them fish free of charge, as it states, "Straw shall not be given to you" (*Shemot* 5:18)? Now if straw was not given free of charge, was fish given to them free of charge? So, what does "free of charge" mean? Free from [the burden of] mitzvot [based on *Sifrei Beha'alothecha* 1:42:5]; (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:6). The Israelites loathed to be monitored spiritually by the manna, they wanted to be 'free' in the lowest sense of the word – free to do whatever they felt like whether it was aligned with the divine will or not. According to Rabbeinu Bachaya, the Israelites expressed their disgust at what was a most valuable gift from G-d. They belittled the manna by comparing it unfavorably to Egypt's most inferior produce. Moreover, the fact that they mentioned fish was an outright insult against the manna since the only kind of fish the Israelites got in Egypt were the fish that had been caught at least four or five days previously and had already begun to decompose and stink. When the Torah refers to the fish in the Nile when the river was turned into blood, the river is described as "stinking with these dead fish" and the dead fish are described as דָּגָה/*daga* (*Shemot* 7:17). Likewise, the Israelites remembered הַדָּגָה/*hadaga* instead of דָּגִים/*dagim* or הַדָּג/*hadag* – "the fish." The word הַדָּגָה/*hadaga* means that these fish had decomposed to the extent that they were recognizable only as a species not individually. Through persistently looking for the negative, the Israelites expressed their dissatisfaction with the good they had.

Torah, Positivity, and Total Trust – The Antidotes to Cravings, Negativity and Worry

The Israelites were concerned and worried about what their future would hold. They feared their bodies would dry out without more substantial food than manna, so they grumbled: "We have nothing but manna to look at: Manna in the morning, manna in the evening" [*Sifrei Beha'alothecha* 1:42:5]; (Rashi, *Bamidbar* 11:6). It got to the point where the Israelites pined after the 'good old days'

of their slavery in Egypt, where they didn't have to worry about their physicality drying up. They got so worried that hundreds of years of hard slave labor in Egypt seemed like paradise. They may have had food and water in Egypt, but they had somehow forgotten about the physical brutality they had endured during their slavery there. G-d miraculously rescued them from over 200 years of cruel slavery, yet they still doubted that He could meet even their most basic needs. We read the *Hagaddah* every Pesach to remind ourselves and recall how Hashem – throughout the ages – has taken care of us, brought us out of the Egyptian slavery, and embraced us with His Holy Torah on Mt. Sinai. The key to overcoming worry is to recall the message of the *Hagaddah*, reminding ourselves that just as Hashem has always been there for us in the past, so will He continue to supervise our lives in the very best way for us. By developing our spiritual desire for Torah, trust in Hashem, and a positive attitude, we can overcome the Human weaknesses of craving, worrying, and constantly noticing the negative. *Parashat Beha'alotcha* means “When you ascend.” In the spirit of *Beha'alotcha*, let us continue to ascend, and step up to ignite the candles of spirituality, positivity, and total trust in Hashem!

Gratitude Focus for the Week of Parashat Beha'alotcha – Some Tips for Overcoming Negativity and Complaining

We need to stay focused on Hashem, remember His faithfulness, and learn to have a thankful heart in all circumstances. I can assure you that it is easier said than done. I am definitely a work in progress when it comes to the area of complaining. I have learned, however, that the more we thank Hashem for all of our blessings in life, the more we recognize His presence in our lives. Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with confiding in a trusted mentor or friend about your life struggles. It can help you grow stronger in your emunah. Complaining, however, involves a completely different mindset.

- **Notice How Complaining Makes You Forget Hashem** – when we choose to complain, we take our focus off of G-d and His goodness. Even throughout hardships and sickness, G-d is good, G-d is our Healer. Complaining can keep us from recognizing that fact.
- **Complaining Causes Us to Focus on Our Problems Rather than the Answer** – The Israelites were complaining in the desert because they had forgotten all that G-d had done for them. In every circumstance leading up to this point, G-d had provided for them. They were so focused on how they felt and stuck in their negative outlook that they had forgotten that G-d had always provided for their needs. Hashem is our loving parent and wants only our best.
- **When we complain, We Cause a Desecration of Hashem's Name** – It is way too easy to 'vent' our frustrations to others. Instead of telling others about Hashem's Divine Supervision in our lives, we end up complaining about our current circumstances. Why would anyone want to serve the G-d of someone unhappy and constantly complaining? We misrepresent our good and faithful G-d when we do nothing but complain.
- **Complaining Keeps Us from Our G-d-given Tasks** – The enemy loves to keep us focused on our problems. G-d has big plans for every one of us, but when we get into a complaining mindset, it's easy to stay there. We can't accomplish much when we are unhappy with life. It makes us live in a constant state of misery, worry, and discontentment. It cripples us from doing the things G-d has called us to do.

• **Complaining About Our Circumstances Won't Change Them** – Can you think of a time when complaining accomplished anything? Probably not. All complaining ever does for me is make me even more upset. I actually become angrier when I complain. I begin to feel 'entitled' somehow... even bitter. Circumstances are changed when we change our attitudes and take action accordingly. Complaining is pointless and won't get you where you need to be.

• **Complaining Stems from an Ungrateful Heart** – The Israelites weren't thinking about all the amazing things G-d had done for them. Instead, they were focused on themselves and their current struggles. We need to stay focused on Hashem. We need to remember His past faithfulness and learn to retain a thankful heart in every circumstance. I can assure you that it is easier said than done. I am definitely a work in progress when it comes to complaining. I have learned, however, that the more we thank G-d for all of our blessings in life, the more we recognize His presence in our lives.