



Testing Each Other Out

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In Parashat BeShallah, the Children of Israel are tested twice, and then they do some testing of their own.

The trials begin immediately after the miraculous crossing of the Sea:

שמות טו:כב-כד

וַיֹּסֶע מֹשֶׁה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּם סוּף וַיֵּצְאוּ אֶל מִדְבַּר שׁוּר וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר וְלֹא מָצְאוּ מַיִם. וַיִּבְאוּ מַרְתָּה וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לִשְׁתּוֹת מִיַּם מַרְתָּה כִּי מָרִים הֵם עַל כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמָהּ מַרְתָּה.

Exodus 15:22-23

Moshe led Israel from the Sea of Reeds into the Shur Desert, and they went three days without water. They came to **Marah** (literally: bitter), but they could not drink the water of **Marah** because it was bitter (*marim*); that is why it was named **Marah**.

This verse uses the word for “bitter” four times—three times as the name of the place and once as a description of the water. What was it about the bitterness of this water that they could not stomach?

The last time they tasted bitterness, it was the *maror* from the night of the Exodus:



שמות יב:

וַאֲכָלוּ אֶת הַבָּשָׂר בַּלַּיְלָה הַזֶּה צְלִי אֵשׁ וּמִצּוֹת עַל מֵרֹרִים יֹאכְלֶהוּ.

Exodus 12:8

They will eat the meat on that night, roasted on the fire, and they will eat unleavened bread (*matzot*) on **bitter herbs** (*merorim*).

No reason is explicitly given for the bitter herbs, but already Rabban Gamliel in the Mishnah (Pesahim 10:5) sees this as a call back to the first chapter of the Exodus, when we learned that:

שמות א':

וַיִּמְרֹרוּ אֶת חַיֵּיהֶם בְּעֶבְדָּה קָשָׁה.

Exodus 1:14

[The Egyptians] **embittered** their lives with extreme labor.

Something about that bitterness of Egypt remains with them; they can still taste it. They may have left, but it seems they have not purged the worst memories of the experience.

So the people complain to Moshe (for the first, but not the last time), Moshe calls out to God, and the crisis is averted:

שמות טו:

וַיִּצְעַק אֶל ה' וַיִּוְרָהוּ ה' עֵץ וַיִּשְׁלַח אֶל הַמַּיִם וַיִּמְתְּקוּ הַמַּיִם שֵׁם שֵׁם לוֹ חֶק וּמִשְׁפָּט וְשֵׁם נִסָּהוּ.

Exodus 15:25

[Moshe] called out to the Eternal, and the Eternal **showed him a piece** of wood. He threw it into the water, **and the water became sweet**. There [God] made for them a rule and a law, and there **[God] tested them**.

What are these rules and laws, and what is the talk of a test? The next verse seems to provide some explanation, though the terms are very general:

שמות טו:כו

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל תִּשְׁמָעוּ בְּקוֹל ה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְהַיִּשָּׁר בְּעֵינֵיכֶם תַּעֲשׂוּ וְהָאֲזָנָה לְמִצְוֹתַי וְשָׁמַרְתֶּם כָּל חֻקֵּי כָל
הַמִּחְלָה אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַתִּי בְּמִצְרַיִם

Shemot 15:26

And [God] said, if you listen to the voice of the Eternal your God, and do what is right in [God's] eyes, and turn your ear to [God's] commandments and keep [God's] rules, then I will not bring upon you any of the sickness that I placed on Egypt.

If this is the “test,” its instructions are fairly straightforward (if a bit vague): listen to God, do what God says. Again there is the mention of God's rules (*hukkim*). It seems that attending to God results in some new way of life, but exactly what is being tested still remains unclear.

The reward offered is also mysterious: relief from the “sickness” of Egypt. Is this a way of speaking about the plagues, or is it some specific illness? The Book of Deuteronomy (28:60) does eventually make reference to, “כָּל מַדִּיחַ מִצְרַיִם - all the diseases of Egypt.” Here in this context, however, the sickness seems to have something to do with the bitter waters they have just tasted. If those waters evoke the *maror*, which in turn evokes the bitterness of Egypt, then the relief that God is promising is from the “sickness” of living under the violence and oppression of Egypt.

In the next of Parashat BeShallah's tests, the objectives are more explicit. This episode begins, once again, with the Children of Israel complaining—and again about foods that correspond to items in that first Pesah meal:

שמות טז:ג

וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִי יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד ה' בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּשִׁבְתֵּנוּ עַל סֵיר הַבָּשָׂר בְּאֲכָלְנוּ לֶחֶם לְשֹׁבַע
כִּי הוֹצֵאתֶם אֹתָנוּ אֶל הַמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה לְהָמִית אֶת-כָּל הַקָּהָל הַזֶּה בָּרָעָב.

Exodus 16:3

The Children of Israel said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Eternal in the Land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of **meat**, when we ate our fill of **bread**! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve this whole congregation to death.”

These people have just been weaned off of the leavened bread of Egypt with *matzah*¹—and already, they are longing for that bread again. As above, God responds immediately with both a cure for their ills, and another test:

שמות טז:ד-ה

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה הִנְנִי מִמְטִיר לָכֶם לֶחֶם מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֵּצֵא הָעָם וּלְקָטוּ דָבָר יוֹם בְּיוֹמוֹ לְמַעַן אֲנֹסְנוּ הֵילֶךְ
בְּתוֹרָתִי אִם לֹא. וְהָיָה בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁשִׁי וְהָכִינוּ אֶת אֲשֶׁר-יֵבִיאוּ וְהָיָה מִשְׁנֶה עַל אֲשֶׁר יִלְקְטוּ יוֹם יוֹם.

Exodus 16:4-5

The Eternal said to Moshe, behold, I will rain down on you **bread from heaven**. And the people will go out and collect it every day, **in order that I can test them to see if they follow My instruction or not**. For on the sixth day they will lay out what they have brought in and it will be double what they have collected every other day.

This time, the nature of the test is articulated: they are to follow God’s “instruction” (*torati*, from the root, י.ר.ה). That language was used in the first test as well, when God “showed” Moshe (*yoreihu*) the wood. But what are the instructions in this case?

¹ For more on this, see my essay from last week, “*Hameitz u-Matzah*,” available here: <https://hadar.org/torah-tefillah/resources/hameitz-u-matzah>.



The people are to collect for six days and, on the sixth, receive a double portion, presumably so they can rest on the seventh day. We, the readers, know that pattern from the creation story: this is Shabbat. But the Israelites have not yet been commanded to observe Shabbat—and there is no mention of Shabbat in their instructions. All they are told is that they should gather what they need on any given day, but that they should not “leave any over for the next morning”—that is, they are not to hoard food for fear of running out, but to trust that the food will come again the next day.

They fail this test:

שמות טז:כ

וְלֹא שָׁמְעוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּתֵרוּ אַנְשִׁים מִמֶּנּוּ עַד בֹּקֶר וַיֵּרָם תּוֹלְעִים וַיָּבֹאשׁ וַיִּקְצֹף עֲלֵהֶם מֹשֶׁה.

Exodus 16:20

But they did not listen to Moshe, and the people did leave over extra for the next morning, and so it became infested with worms and stank, and Moshe was angry at them.

When they receive their double portion on the sixth day, they are worried. There’s no way they can finish this in one day. Moshe then explains that this collection is different:

שמות טז:כג

וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם הוּא אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר ה' שְׁבִתוֹן שַׁבַּת קֹדֶשׁ לַה' מָחָר אֵת אֲשֶׁר תֹּאכְלוּ אִפּוֹ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר תִּבְשְׁלוּ בַשֶּׁלִּי וְאֵת כָּל-הָעֵדִף הַנִּיחוּ לָכֶם לְמִשְׁמֶרֶת עַד הַבֹּקֶר.

Exodus 16:23

He said to them, “This is what the Eternal spoke: tomorrow is a day of rest, a holy Shabbat for the Eternal. Bake what you bake, and cook what you cook, and the rest you can leave over until morning.”



Indeed they do, and the next day they see that **these** loaves of heavenly bread have not spoiled.

This is the first time they have been taught about Shabbat, which will become one of the hallmark *mitzvot* of the Jewish people. They are not being commanded in it yet; that will come next week. Now they are being tested to see whether they can follow instructions at all—especially ones that push against the instincts of desperate self-preservation, cultivated over generations of slavery.

They fail again, by the way. When the seventh day arrives, Moshe tells them not to go out to gather. Again, he says: this is Shabbat, a holy rest day for God! But in the next verse they do go out, trying to collect—and find nothing. Even when they have enough, they are frantically in search of their next meal. Old habits die hard.

Eventually, we read: “וַיִּשְׁכְּתוּ הָעָם בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי - people rested on the seventh day.” They are learning. They seem to finally have passed this test. They are learning to trust Moshe, and through him, to rely on God. It is beginning to seem like they are ready to receive the Torah, with all of its rules.

Before the *parashah* closes, however, there is yet another incident of thirsting for water, and this time, it is the people who are doing the testing:

שמות יז:ב

וַיִּרְבְּ הָעָם עִם מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ תִּנּוּ לָנוּ מַיִם וְנִשְׁתֶּה וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם מֹשֶׁה מֶה תִּרְיִבִּין עִמָּדִי מֶה תִּנְסֹן אֶת ה'.

Exodus 17:2

The people argued with Moshe and they said, “Give us water to drink!” And he said to them. “Why are you arguing with me, **and why are you testing the Eternal?**”

What did Moshe mean when he said that the people were “testing God,” and what is the nature of this test? The answer comes when the place of the episode itself is named:

שמות יז:

וַיִּקְרָא שֵׁם הַמָּקוֹם מַסָּה וּמְרִיבָה עַל רִיב בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְעַל נִסְתָּם אֶת ה' לֵאמֹר הֲיֵשׁ ה' בְּקִרְבָּנוּ אִם אֵין.

Exodus 17:7

The place was called Massah Umrivah (*lit.* test and argument) because of the argument (*riv*) of the children of Israel, and because **they tested the Eternal, saying, is the Eternal among us, or not?**

This language is the inverse of the test in the case of the manna, where God tested Israel to know if Israel would “follow my instruction or not.” That question was not settled in any complete way, and it will continue to be relevant, as we move forward into the Torah.

Now Israel is testing God back, to know whether God is really present among them, or not? Will God really relieve their bitterness and their misery, or not? Will God really provide for them, or not? Can God protect them if someone else tries to harm them, or not?

That last question, at least, is given an answer in the very next lines, the last episode of Parashat BeShallah, the sudden attack by Amalek. The Israelites prevail whenever Moshe raises his hands to the heavens. Then God promises to wipe out Amalek completely. In thanks, Moshe builds an altar and names it: “ה' נֹסִי - the Eternal is my Banner.” That name

slyly hints at a double meaning: the word for “my Banner” (*nisi*) could also mean “my Test”—a fitting metaphor for being in this new relationship with God.

Both Israel and God have passed their tests—for now. They are ready to enter together into true covenant. But they will continue to test each other, to push on the edges of their relationship, and to make sure it still holds. God continues to wonder: will we follow God’s Torah, or not? And we continue to wonder: is God really here among us, or not?

