



Critique and Creativity

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Parashat Hukat 5782

In Parashat Hukat, the people complain again about their food in the wilderness, but this complaint is different from earlier complaints. They don't remember the food in Egypt with nostalgia, nor do they crave a particular item. They are disgusted with manna:

במדבר כא:ד-ה

וַיֵּסְעוּ מֵהַר הָהָר, דֶּרֶךְ יַם-סוּף, לְסֻבָּב, אֶת-אֶרֶץ אֱדוֹם; וַתִּקְצַר נַפְשׁ-הָעָם, בַּדֶּרֶךְ. וַיְדַבֵּר הָעָם, בְּאֱלֹהִים וּבַמֹּשֶׁה, לֵמָּה הֶעָלִיתָנוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם, לָמוֹת בַּמִּדְבָּר: כִּי אֵין לָחֶם, וְאֵין מַיִם, וְנִפְשָׁנוּ קָצָה, בִּלְחֶם הַקֶּלֶקֶל.

Bemidbar 21:4-5

They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against God and against Moses: "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food."

This similar but different complaint comes from the generation that has grown up on manna. They have known little else for their whole lives, and they are tired of eating this food. According to Rashi, they are complaining about the ways in which manna is not like "real" food, because it creates no waste. The food just absorbs into their limbs—it "enters" but nothing comes out.

רש"י במדבר כא:ה

בִּלְחֶם הַקֶּלֶקֶל. לְפִי שֶׁהֵמָּן נִבְלַע בְּאֲבָרִים קָרְאוּהוּ קֶלֶקֶל, אָמְרוּ, עֲתִיד הָמָן הַזֶּה שִׁיתַּפֹּחַ בְּמַעֲיָנוּ, כְּלוּם יֵשׁ יְלִיד אִשָּׁה שֶׁמִּכְנִיס וְאִינוּ מוֹצִיא?



Rashi on Bemidbar 21:5

This miserable food. Because the manna was absorbed into their limbs they called it miserable, saying, In the future this manna will swell up in our insides – can any mortal keep absorbing without excreting?

It seems like it would be magical to eat this kind of food, where your body uses everything you eat and there is no waste. The Talmud describes this as an angel-like state (Yoma 75b).¹ But the people want to be like regular mortals. They want to eat and excrete. They cannot appreciate this special state: its abnormality makes them nervous. They fear the food will swell in their bodies and make them ill.

Hizkuni offers a different reading of this complaint, with two comments both less focused on mortal versus angel and more focused on a desire for independence:

חזקוני במדבר (פרשת חקת) כא:ה

"כי אין לחם" - עד עתה היינו סבורים ליכנס לארץ ומתאזנים לאכול מתבואתה.

ד"א לשון קלקול כמו והגבעות התקלקלו² אינו נותן כח באדם.

Hizkuni Bemidbar (Parashat Hukat) 21:5

"Because there is no bread"—all this time, we have been expecting to enter the land, and we are craving to eat some of its produce. Alternatively: the word *kelokel*, miserable, like "and the hills quivered,"—it does not give a person strength.

In this first comment, he suggests that what they want is real "bread," (לחם), that comes from wheat that they themselves will harvest from the land. This is the generation that has been wandering in the desert their whole lives. The food may be fine—but they are tired of being fed. They are straining with eagerness to enter the land and grow their own food.

In this vein, we might reread Rashi. Perhaps the people's concern isn't about being abnormal by making no excrement. The concern is that they don't just want to "absorb" (מכניס), they

¹ Talmud Bavli Yoma 75b

תנו רבנן: "לחם אבירים אכל איש", לחם שמלאכי השרת אוכלין אותו, דברי רבי עקיבא. וכן נאמר דברים לפני רבי ישמעאל, אמר להם: צאו ואמרו לו לעקיבא: עקיבא טעית! וכי מלאכי השרת אוכלין לחם? והלא כבר נאמר: "לחם לא אכלתי ומים לא שתיתי!" אלא, מה אני מקיים "אבירים" — לחם שנבלע במאמץ וארבעים ושמנה אבירים. אלא מה אני מקיים: "וידד תהיה לך על אֲזְנֶיךָ..." לאסר שספרו אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא: אני אמרתי: יהיו כמלאכי השרת, עכשיו אני מטרים אותם שלש פרסאות...

² Yirmiyahu 4:24

ראיתי ההרים והנה רעשים וכל הגבעות התקלקלו:

I look at the mountains, They are quaking; And all the hills are rocking.



also want to “produce” (מוציא). The generation of slaves who left Egypt complained based on a mindset of food insecurity. This generation yearns to grow up and become independent, not to be cared for as babies their whole lives.

Hizkuni’s second comment offers a different version of this picture. They complain because the manna does not give them strength. Perhaps the manna meets their basic nutritional needs, but it fails to sustain human power and agency.

In response to these complaints about the manna, God sends fiery serpents that bite the people, and many of them die. To heal, God tells Moshe to make a copper snake for them to look at and live:

במדבר כא:ו-ח

וַיִּשְׁלַח ה' בָּעָם, אֶת הַנָּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרָפִים, וַיִּנְשְׁכוּ, אֶת-הָעָם; וַיָּמָת עִם-רַב, מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל. וַיָּבֹא הָעָם אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ חֲטֵאנוּ, כִּי-דִבַּרְנוּ בְּה' וְנָכַר--הַתַּפְלִל אֶל-ה', וַיִּסַּר מֵעֲלֵינוּ אֶת-הַנָּחָשׁ; וַיִּתְּפֹלֵל מֹשֶׁה, בְּעַד הָעָם. וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה, עֲשֵׂה לָךְ שָׂרָף, וְשִׂים אֹתוֹ, עַל-גָּס; וְהָיָה, כָּל-הַנָּשׁוּךְ, וַרְאָה אֹתוֹ, וְחָיָה.

Bemidbar 21:6-8

God sent *seraph* serpents against the people. They bit the people and many of the Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned by speaking against God and against you. Intercede with God to take away the serpents from us!” And Moses interceded for the people. Then God said to Moses, “Make a *seraph* figure and mount it on a standard. And anyone who was bitten who then looks at it shall recover.”

On its face, this seems at odds with the Torah, like a form of idol worship. Does the snake really have the power to heal? The rabbinic picture responds to this theological problem. The Mishnah relates that the snake itself is not what healed the people, but by looking at the snake they looked towards God, and God is the one who healed them.

משנה ראש השנה ג:ח

כיוצא בדבר אתה אומר (במדבר כ"א) עשה לך שרף ושים אותו על נס והיה כל הנשך וראה אותו וחי וכי נחש ממית או נחש מחיה אלא בזמן שישראל מסתכלין כלפי מעלה ומשעבדין את לבם לאביהן שבשמים היו מתרפאים ואם לאו היו נימוקים

Mishnah Rosh Hashanah 3:8

Similarly you say (Bemidbar 21): “Make a *seraph* figure and mount it on a standard. And anyone who was bitten who then looks at it shall recover.” Can it be that a snake

kills, or that a snake gives life?! Rather, when Israel looked upward, and subjected their hearts to their Parent in heaven, they would be healed and if not they would rot.

The point of the copper snake was to direct their eyes and hearts towards heaven, to “bind their hearts” to God,³ instilling a sense of dependence. Perhaps this was meant to drill down on what the people wanted to deny, to remind them that they are, indeed, dependent on God. One day they will have to grow their own food in their own land, but they should not have the illusion that even that will mean that they are independent. As humans we are never fully in control. The manna is just a concrete manifestation of their dependence, meant to instill an ethos for a lifetime.

One tradition about the copper snake, however, goes in a different direction that does stress the human ability to “produce” and not just absorb, to exercise creativity and independence, not just deferentially take and preserve what we are given.

After the sage known as “Rabbi” gives a particularly lenient ruling (in *Hullin* 6b),⁴ his colleagues attack him. They criticize him for being too independent-minded: “If your ancestors were strict,” he is asked, “how can you be lenient?” The idea seems to be that the intellectual project of Torah is about preserving what came before us. It is about absorbing, not about creating something new.

In response to this critique, Rabbi comments on a mention of the copper snake in the book of Kings: In the times of King *Hizkiyyah*, the snake was worshiped as idolatry, and he crushed it up so it would no longer lead people astray (*Melakhim* II 18:4). Why, Rabbi asks, had *Hizkiyyah*’s predecessors not taken care of this object of idolatry, since they destroyed all of the other idolatry in the land? He concludes:

תלמוד בבלי חולין ו:

מקום הניחו לו אבותיו להתגדר בו, אף אני מקום הניחו לי אבותי להתגדר בו.

³ רשב"ם במדבר (פרשת חקת) כא:ח
(ח) וראה אותו - שיסתכל לשמים למעלה:

⁴ Talmud Bavli *Hullin* 6b

העיד רבי יהושע בן זרזו בן חמיו של רבי מאיר לפני רבי על ר"מ שאכל עלה של ירק בבית שאן, והתיר רבי את בית שאן כולה על ידו. חבירו עליו אחיו ובית אביו, אמרו לו: מקום שאבותיך ואבות אבותיך נהגו בו איסור, אתה תנהוג בו היתר? דרש להן מקרא זה: וכתת נחש הנחשת אשר עשה משה כי עד הימים ההמה היו בני ישראל מקטרים לו ויקרא לו נחושטן, אפשר באסא ולא ביערו, בא יהושפט ולא ביערו? והלא כל עבודה זרה שבעולם אסא ויהושפט ביערום! אלא מקום הניחו לו אבותיו להתגדר בו, אף אני מקום הניחו לי אבותי להתגדר בו.

Talmud Bavli Hullin 6b

His ancestors left room for him to achieve prominence, and so too my ancestors left room for me to achieve prominence

The legacy that Hizkiyyah absorbed was unfinished; there was still more for him to do. His going ahead and getting rid of what he perceived to be an idolatrous object that his ancestors had left behind should not be viewed as a “departure” from their legacy. Rather, he absorbed what he could from them — and then he took it further.

However, this is not really a satisfying proof-text for the idea that someone can rule **differently** from their ancestors; it just shows that one can continue to expand upon it. They uprooted idolatry, and he continued to uproot more. Rabbi, in contrast, rules leniently, against the stringencies in his inherited tradition. Yet, the Talmud still links Rabbi’s innovative ruling to this story about the snake to explain Rabbi’s departure from earlier traditions.

What is fascinating, then, is the way this tradition about Hizkiyyah crushing the snake ends up being deployed. It is not only about continuing the unfinished work of ancestors, and certainly not about doubling down and expanding inherited stringencies. The copper snake becomes a paradigm for later generations to arrive at independent conclusions. Once one has absorbed a rich inheritance of Torah, the copper snake teaches that one can, perhaps must, also produce.

We have seen that this generation in the desert complains about food out of a concern for growth in their own agency and independence. At first reading, we see them “punished” for this, and seemingly put in their place by being reminded of their subservience to God, looking up towards heaven when they gaze at the copper snake. But actually this is the generation that will enter the land, and it is important to have a desire for independence. They **should** want to grow in their ability to produce, not just absorb. In the Talmud the copper snake comes to represent the importance of independence and creativity in development of the tradition—and to consciously leave room for the next generation to do their own digging and their own work. “My ancestors left me room to achieve prominence.” When we trace the longer arc of the story of the copper snake, we see validation of the people’s desire to create and produce. May we all merit to absorb what we need to absorb, and to create all that we can create, and most importantly, that we pave the way for the next generation to create what they need to create.

