

# VARIETY EFFECT



**PSYCHED FOR TORAH - PARSHAT BEHAALOTCHA**  
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Research on the “variety effect” proves what most of us know after partaking of a smorgasbord. People tend to eat more when there are more options. When the color, flavor, or shape of a food is varied we ingest more than we do if there is just one choice. By satiating a range of sensory experiences, we are able to fulfill more desires with increased consumption. Perhaps unsurprisingly, variety related eating habits are linked to obesity.

After over a year of consuming the manna, Bnei Yisrael had enough. Yes, it looked nice and tasted good, but food falling from the Heavens was not enough to prevent complaining. They wanted meat. They remembered with fondness the fish they ate in Egypt *chinam* (for free), as well as the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. Yet upon analysis, we are left wondering. Are cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic really that superior to the manna? Was the food in Egypt really that free and easy to come by that it beat the convenience of food falling from the sky?

The *Midrash*, cited by Rashi, is convinced that there is a deeper motivation behind the complaint. Bnei Yisrael couldn't be longing for the free food in Egypt, because according to the *Midrash*, there was no free food in Egypt. The Egyptians made them work tirelessly to find their own straw in order to make their own bricks – the Egyptians weren't exactly in the business of handing out free food. Rather, underneath Bnei Yisrael's complaints, either consciously or subconsciously, was a more serious protest. They missed not the free food, but the freedom from restraints. In Egypt they were free from *mitzvot*, and now they were constrained with rules and regulations.

Unlike the *Midrash*, Ramban understands *chinam* at face value. In Egypt, he suggests, they did have ease of access to food. If they worked by the river, they were allowed to catch and eat fish. If they worked in the fields, there was such an abundance, that the field owners allowed Bnei Yisrael to eat what they liked as they gathered the crops. Yes, they had to work, but they could eat whenever they wanted because it was so plentiful and available. Manna was also free financially, but it was not as free from restrictions. With the manna, Bnei Yisrael could only get a controlled portion within a specific schedule. The Meshech Chochma points out that they even had meat available to eat, but the only way to eat it was to bring it to the *Ohel Moed*. There was plenty of free food, but there were also restrictions.

Perhaps an additional part of the complaint is tied to the monotony of the manna. It was the same food, every day. The nostalgia of cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic is not about taste, but variety. On a similar level, the Netziv proposes that the foods they requested represent different courses. Instead of just having one course of manna, Bnei Yisrael wanted appetizers, dips, and dessert to go along with it.

G-d was trying to teach them controlled, scheduled, spiritually-motivated eating. Bnei Yisrael rebelled and complained because they desired the unbounded, unrestricted, smorgasbord variety of eating that they were used to from Egypt. In our own lives, whether in the context of food or otherwise, we may have a natural desire for variety and freedom from constraints. Yet, the message of the manna and the aftermath of the complaint is that it is beneficial to curb this craving. In so doing, may we merit living more psychologically, physically, and spiritually healthy lives.

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