

WITH CRISIS COMES HUNGER

A commentary on *Parashat Behaalotecha*

By Laura Marks OBE

According to the World Economic Forum, at the end of 2015 there were 65.3 million forcibly displaced people on Earth. They included 21.3 million refugees, 40.8 million internally displaced and 3.2 million asylum seekers with nearly half of them coming from Somalia, Syria and Afghanistan.

Over 80% of refugees are hosted by developing nations, the least able to support them. The number of child refugees is growing with, globally, nearly one in 200 children a refugee. Hunger in refugee camps is well documented as supplies are unreliable and inadequate and stories of child labour, often in unsafe and unregulated jobs circulate.

The Israelites were, of course, refugees too. Fleeing from slavery in Egypt they wandered through the desert for 40 years in conditions that must have been unbearable. We are told their main food source was *manna*, and water would have been scarce even though Miriam, Moses's sister, is credited by Rashi, writing in the 11th Century, with providing a miraculous source of water to the thirsty travellers.

In this *Parasha*, the Israelites are found complaining about the food to Moses. They demand meat, food like they had known in Egypt, and Moses turns to G-d for advice and support. Whilst it is at this time that Moses was advised to set up what we might now call an advisory board and the first attempt at

power sharing is seen (possibly in history?) actually it was divine intervention which dealt with the food revolt, not the leaders at all.

The situation resonates with the hunger of desperate people today; refugees fleeing the terrors of civil war in Syria, people facing

drought in East Africa, oppression in Darfur and even the thousands of families in Britain who have turned to hundreds of food-banks, in one of the richest countries in the world, for basic food. The Trussel Trust, one of the UK's largest food banks reported giving nearly 1.2 million, three-day emergency food parcels away in 2016-17. With crisis comes hunger.

G-d, we are told, intervened for the Israelites and sent a wind which blew huge numbers of quails from the sea, enough to feed the hungry Israelites with a massive feast of meat, on which they 'gorged' themselves. Ironically, and inexplicably, all those who ate the quail with 'gluttony' were struck down with plague. Was the meat infected or was this a punishment for excess and self indulgence?

Maybe the plague reminds us, rather brutally, that food comes at a cost. Food supplies are limited and we need to treat our environment with respect, a message which resonates in the modern climate of global warming, environmental damage, mass farming methods and of course, widespread hunger, as much as it did for the Israelites who paid a seemingly harsh price for complaining and overeating. Hunger and oppression go hand in hand. The Israelites fled oppression but it took generations before they were able to be both free and secure in their ability to feed themselves.

So the messages for today are clear. Our responsibility to people seeking refuge goes well beyond safety from war and violence. We need to face up to the interacting pressures of welcoming strangers to our land, feeding people who cannot feed themselves, and caring for our environment. This is a long-term commitment and will take time and perseverance and the engagement of every one of us.

The winds today bring wobbly boatloads of people in from the sea, not mountains of food. However, in both cases, the arrivals challenge us to consider our individual and collective responsibilities both to one another and to the world which we all share.

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