

Table Talk: Beshalach

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In *Annie Hall*, Woody Allen tells this joke: Two elderly women are at a Catskills resort. One of them says, "Boy, the food at this place is terrible." The other one says, "Yeah, I know, and such small portions."

Jews like to complain. There, we admit it. Are you happy now?

In *parashat B'Shallah* this week, the Israelites do a lot of grumbling. They were slaves in Egypt for 400 years and now they're free. You might think they'd be happy. But no. "What have you done to us," they ask Moses, "taking us out of Egypt?" They're hot, they're tired, they're thirsty, the food is lousy, and the portions are too small. If they'd wanted to be miserable they could have stayed in Egypt. At one point, Moses tells God he's worried the people will riot.

How does God respond to the whining and the threat of rebellion? Does He punish these newly freed slaves for being ungrateful? No. Without asking for anything in return, He gives them what they need. Everybody eats. Everybody gets a warm, dry place to live.

Maybe God recognizes that the Israelites were accustomed to slavery, that they were afraid of freedom, afraid of change, and not certain how to take care of themselves. So He gives the people what they need to start anew. It's just enough for them to get by. And it means everything.

As you share your Shabbat dinner, go ahead and complain if the chicken's too salty. Complaining feels great sometimes. But when you're done griping, you might try asking these questions around the table:

1. How do you feel when you don't have enough to eat? How does it affect your mood?
2. Is there a minimum standard of food and housing to which all humans are entitled? If so, are we as a society doing enough to make sure that minimum standard is met for everyone?
3. When God delivered food to the Israelites, He gave them only as much as they could eat in a day and caused the rest to rot. Why do you think God didn't want the people to have an abundance or even a little bit extra?

Shabbat Shalom!