Parshat HaShavua  
Yeshivat Har Etzion

PARASHAT MATOT - MAS'EI

By Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot

As we come to the close of the Sefer, I would like to develop and tie together a number of strands that I have addressed in the VBM Bamidbar shiurim (both this year and last) and in two articles in TRADITION magazine (Spring 1993; Spring 1998) on the "sin" of Moses and the Benei-Reuven/Gad episode of our parasha, respectively.

A.

In parashat Chukat, ch. 20 is a critical turning point in the narrative of the desert. The first generation has died out and the second generation is now on the scene. It is interesting to note that the first scene at Mei Meriva takes place at Kadesh (20:1), on the cusp of the southern border of the Land of Israel. After all the wandering in the desert, they ultimately arrive back at what was to be the original jump-off point for entry and conquest into the land. The Jewish people were, it appears, originally primed to enter the land directly from the south, going up through the Negev and reaching the mountains of Chevron and further. This is precisely the route that was earlier taken by the meraglim, and would have been the logical one to be taken by the people as a whole. Unfortunately, the mission was derailed by the meraglim incident and forty years had to pass for the older generation to die out. At this point, in ch. 20, however, a new generation was on the scene. The placement of the first narrative of the second generation at Kadesh certainly invites speculation that God's intention was for this new generation to pick up where their fathers and mothers had left off. They were now to once more begin the delayed march into the land directly through the southern corridor of the Negev.

It is here that the terrible tragedy of Mei Meriva occurs, causing once again a major change in the mission. Moshe loses his position of leadership. I have written elsewhere that the Torah seems to present the water crisis at Mei Meriva as a potential Matan Torah experience for the new generation:

Throughout this section, the Torah emphasizes that the entire congregation must witness the event. Moreover the phrase "take the rod and gather the assembly together" (hakhel et ha-eida) [Numbers 20:7] clearly echoes the experience of Sinai, which is termed "the day of assembly - yom ha-kahal" throughout the book of Deuteronomy (e.g., 9:10). It also reminds us of the gathering that is to occur once in seven years where the Torah uses similar terminology - "hakhel et ha-am ..."(Deut. 31:12). Hakhel itself is patterned after the revelation experience at Sinai, whose goal was to imbue the community with yir'at shamayim, faith and commitment to the covenant." (TRADITION, SPRING 1993)

This idea, without the literary parallels, is already hinted at in a fascinating comment of Rav Meir Simcha of Dvinsk, zt"l, author of MESHEKH CHOCHMA, who writes in his comments to 20:11:

"It may be suggested in relation to the incident at Mei Meriva, that at the time of Matan Torah the Jewish people were elevated to the point that they 'saw the sounds' (Shemot 20:15), they saw that which is audible. ... Thus God also wanted that in Moshe's speaking to the rock the people see the divine utterance, which emerges from the throat of Moshe, wherein the Shekhina resides, and see how it affects the rock, and thus they should "see" that which is heard, and this should strengthen their faith in a similar fashion to that which occurred at the exalted event [i.e., Matan Torah]."

If this reading is correct, we can speculate as to what the subsequent weeks might have looked like. It is certainly plausible that the people would still have had to encounter Edom and Sichon and all the other nations that we find in the latter parts of Sefer Bamidbar. God would still have brought the people to Arvot Moav for a second covenant ceremony and most of the narrative and content of Sefer Devarim as we know it would have been the same.

I think, though, that it is possible that the repetition of the Torah and other parts of what we know today as Sefer Devarim might have been presented by Moshe directly to the people right here in ch. 20 of Bamidbar, at KADESH, before the intended entry. The encounters with Sichon and Og and Moav and Edom might not have happened at this juncture and would have been left until after the conquest of the land west of the Jordan. It is equally possible to suggest that this min-revelation of God's power and concern would not have included a repetition of the law. The revelation of God's power and concern might have been enough at this point. The people, led by Moshe, would have gone straight into the Land and only there, in the new reality, would they have engaged in a review of the covenant. This, however, is not what transpired and the Jewish people indeed did not continue directly into the Land led by Moshe. Instead, they once again began travelling in a circuitous route, eventually reaching the east bank of the Jordan River, hundreds of miles to the northeast of Kadesh.

This context provides a fitting framework for the themes that we developed in other shiurim, including the shiur on parashat Balak. As I outlined in that shiur two weeks ago, the entire Balak/Bil'am narrative appears to be a mini-Yetziat Mitzrayim experience for the new generation. In effect, then, the entire process of the travels and travails of the desert, with, of course, the clear changes related to place and circumstances, are experienced by the second generation. In last year's shiur on parashat Matot, we further noted that the entire encounter with the daughters of Moav at Ba'al Pe'or appears to be a mini-Chet Ha-egel experience. Let me quote a portion of that shiur:

It seems clear from both the thematic and literary presentation that the Ba'al Pe'or episode is a replay of the "CHET HA-EGEL - GOLDEN CALF" experience. In a word, it is the chet ha-egel II, that of the second generation paralleling the one of the first generation! Let us outline some of the major parallels pointing in that direction:

1. In both stories, the Jewish people, (in both narratives "ha-am") involve themselves in idolatry through the vehicle of eating from the pagan sacrifices and bowing:

"..they offered olot and brought shelamim, and the people ("ha-am") sat down to eat and to drink, and they rose up to play ... and they worshipped it" (Shemot 32:6-8).

"They called the people ("ha-am") to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate, and bowed down to their gods" (Bemidbar 25:2).

2. The Torah presents the idolatrous worship of Ba'al Pe'or as a direct result of the social interaction with the daughters of Moav and the subsequent sexual licentiousness leading to pagan behavior:

"Israel abode in Shitim, and the people began to LIZNOT with the daughters of Moav..." (25:1).

In the immediate aftermath of the chet ha-egel in Shemot 34, this is precisely the same order of events that the Torah forewarns the Jewish people will occur if they enter into covenant with the local inhabitants. In that chapter, which recounts the re-establishment of covenant between God and the Jewish people, God warns the people lest they repeat the same mistakes in the context of their encounter with the nations they will meet in the future. The people are warned not to enter into treaty with those nations in almost the exact same language as that described in the Ba'al Pe'or incident!:

"Lest you make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they will ZANU after their gods, and will sacrifice to their gods; and he will call you and you will eat of his sacrifice. And you take their daughters ... VE-ZANU ... VE-HIZNU ..." (Shemot 34:15-16).

Note carefully the repetition of the verb root "zana" relating to sexual licentiousness and the seduction theme that will lead your sons to "their gods," all elements reiterated in the Ba'al Pe'or incident! Finally, it should be noted that Chazal in a wonderful midrashic move inserted the of sexual licentiousness into the chet ha-egel story proper by interpreting the phrase "Va-yakumu letzachek" (to play - Shemot 32,6) as referring to sexual activity - (see further Seder Eliyahu Rabba ch. 13 and Rashi to that verse)!

3. In both episodes God's anger is kindled against the people with the specific term "charon af" (Shemot 32:10-13; Bemidbar 25:3), with the threat of utter destruction hanging over the entire people captured by the same verb root - "kala," a verb rarely used in the sin narratives of the Torah:

"Leave me... and I will consume them (akhalem)" (Shemot 32,10 and 32,12) "Pinchas ... was zealous for My sake among them, that I did not consume (khiliti) Bnei Yisrael in My jealousy" (Bemidbar 25:11).

4. In both episodes the command comes down for part of the Jewish people to take up arms against their fellow brethren:

"Slay every man his brother, and every man his companion and every man his relative" (Shemot 32:27) "Slay every man his men, who joined Ba'al Pe'or" (Bemidbar 25:5)

5. In both stories the charge is lead by major figures of the house of Levi, i.e., Moshe Rabbeinu leading the charge in Shemot and Pinchas taking charge and killing the public offenders. This theme is succinctly noted in an anonymous midrash cited in Torah Sheleima (Pinchas #80) "The tribe of Levi stood up and acted at the chet ha-egel, and here the tribe of Levi acted as well, for once Pinchas saw the act of Zimri he said to himself my forefathers etc." Parenthetically, it is of course interesting to note that in the aftermath of each incident the status of those who eradicated the evil doers was elevated. After the chet ha-egel, the levi'im replaced the first-born for service in the Mishkan while in the aftermath of the Ba'al Pe'or incident, Pinchas and his line receive the "berit kehunat olam."

6. In both stories in addition to those who are killed at the point of the sword, an entire group of sinners dies as a result of a mageifa - a plague of retribution.

B.

At this point let us return to our parasha, specifically to ch. 32 - the narrative of the Benei Reuven and Gad. I would like to develop a theme based on an idea that I heard many years ago from my good friend and colleague, Rabbi David Silber (director of the Drisha Institute for Jewish Education). Given that the second generation experiences the first of the major sins committed by the first generation, chet ha-egel, it follows that they might experience the second of the major crises of their forerunners, the chet ha-meraglim as well. And indeed, this is precisely one way to read the episode of the two tribes, Reuven and Gad, who request the land of Sichon and Og. This parallel clearly emerges from both a thematic and literary perspective of reading ch.32.

1. During the meraglim episode the spies were divided into two camps, TEN of them against entry into the Land of Israel and TWO, Caleb and Yehoshua (representing the tribes of Yehuda and Yosef-Efrayim), advocating continuation of God's mission. Here in the Benei-Reuven and Gad episode we have an inverted parallel, in that TEN of the tribes are ready to enter the land while TWO tribes (Reuven and Gad) would like to remain back, outside of the promised land. Moreover, the specific identity of the tribes is very significant. While in the meraglim section the two "good" tribes were Yehuda (Caleb) and Yosef (Efrayim), representing the leadership of the two centers of power in the Jewish people, the Leah line and the Rachel line, in our section the two tribes who want to remain back are specifically from the rejected line of leadership, from Reuven, who was replaced as bekhor at the end of Sefer Bereishit. (Gad is parallel to Reuven, as he is the first-born of Zilpa, the concubine of Leah. He is part of the nexus of the rejected Leah line, a point which is developed at greater length in my TRADITION, 1998 article.) Eventually, half of Menasheh, the rejected first-born of the Yosef line, joins in with Reuven and Gad, thus completing the inverted parallel to the meraglim which can be charted as follows:

MERAGLIM (ch. 13)

"GOOD" - 2 tribes Yehuda (Caleb) - Leah line Yosef – Efrayim (Yehoshua) - Rachel Line "BAD" - The rest of the 10 tribes

BENEI REUVEN AND GAD (ch. 32)

"GOOD" - 10 tribes INCLUDING Yehuda and Efrayim "BAD" - 2 tribes Reuven and Gad - rejected leaders of Leah line half of Menasheh - rejected leader of Rachel line

2. Moshe's reaction to their suggestion here in Matot clearly connects us back to the meraglim. Moshe speaks of Reuven and Gad as once again undermining the mission as their forefathers had done "when I sent them from Kadesh Barneia to scout the land" (verse 8). He continues with a lengthy recounting of the incident of the meraglim and explicitly mentions that Caleb and Yehoshua alone were allowed entry into the land, while all the others were left to die in the desert. He concludes his rebuke by telling them that they are now rising up in place of their parents and committing the very same sin. This action, he concludes, will once more bring God's wrath upon the people and they will continue to wander in the desert! (32:9-15)

It is, here of course, that the two stories diverge.   
a. While in the meraglim episode proper, the majority of the people were in favor of abandoning entry into the land, here it was the reverse with most of the tribes not joining the request of Reuven.   
b. In ch. 13 the leadership of Am Yisrael, Yehuda and Yosef was in the distinct minority. Here Yehuda and Efrayim are part of the majority of the tribes wanting to enter.   
c. Most significantly, in parashat Shelach the people are frightened and not willing to engage in conquest of the land. They truly want to replace Moshe and return to Egypt, thus undermining and reversing the entire course of Jewish history until this point. Here in parashat Matot, it turns out that Moshe's concerns were exaggerated. Even the two tribes who wanted to remain in Transjordan had no desire to turn their back on their fellow brethren and the collective mission of the Jewish people. They ARE willing to fight and take part in the conquest of the land, thereby ensuring the fulfillment of God's historical plan. Therefore, what emerges is that while the "meraglim" episode of the first generation leads to their downfall, that of the second generation does not. They, seemingly confronted with a parallel situation, do not act or react like the first generation. They truly are worthy to enter and fulfill the destiny that their parents could not. In this way, the Torah highlights the difference between the first generation that does not merit to enter and that of the second that does. The second generation experiences their own chet ha-egel (the daughters of Moav) overcoming that through the internal actions of Pinchas and the external actions of destroying the Midianites (who had originally seduced the Jewish men) in ch. 31. Similarly, the first generation had experienced the meraglim and failed while the second generation undergoes a similar challenge and emerges with the mission and its faith in God intact.

C.

Given this superstructure, we may gain an insight into an enigmatic piece of information that is presented to us at the end of ch. 32. After the pact with the tribes of Reuven, Gad and Menasheh are sealed, the Torah tells us the following:

"And the children of Makhir, son of Menasheh, went to Gil'ad and captured it in battle, and they dispossessed the Emori who were in it. And Moshe gave Gil'ad to Makhir the son of Menasheh; and he lived there. And Yair the son of Menasheh went and captured their villages and called them Chavot-Yair. And Novach went and captured Kenat and its hamlets, and he called it Novach, after his own name." (verses 39-42)

What is the significance of this little addendum regarding territory captured by the sons of Menasheh in the northern tip of the Emori territory (today Northern Jordan)?

In light of the thesis presented above identifying the Reuven-Gad narrative as an inverted meraglim story, it would appear that this smaller passage is an inverted "ma'apilim" story, the narrative follows directly on the heals of meraglim in ch. 14. After God decreed that the Jewish people would not enter the Land of Israel, there was a group of people who expressed remorse and decided to now go up and capture the Land by force. God, however, warned them NOT to go into battle, for he would not be with them. They ignored this admonition, and the text tells us that neither Moshe nor the ark moved from the camp. The people are decimated in battle with the Canaanites, who are significantly called "EMORI" in the recounting of this story in Devarim (1:44).

In our section we have the exact opposite scenario. After the Torah has made clear that Reuven and Gad are ready to go into battle on behalf of the land, the inversion continues. The children of Menasheh immediately go into battle against the EMORI and are successful in routing them off the land. Moreover, Moshe gives his stamp of approval to their initiative by directly giving them this territory, without in any way making it dependent on joining the effort of capturing Eretz Yisrael as he did with the rest of the territory of Sichon and Og (see the last lines of the Meshekh Chokhma's comments to 32:33). It is almost as if this area of northern Gil'ad had the status of Eretz Yisrael and not Transjordan. Thus, it is exactly parallel to the territory that the "ma'apilim" unsuccessfully had wanted to capture, i.e., the land of Israel proper, which the meraglim had rejected!

Furthermore, this approach gains added resonance in light of a famous midrashic comment regarding Tzlofchad. Rashi in parashat Pinchas (ch. 27) citing the Talmud in Shabbat, quotes a tradition that Tzlofchad was one of the ma'apilim. Building on this aggada, the last portion of the entire sefer is now filled with added meaning. At the end of ch. 36, the Torah recounts that the daughters of Tzlofchad, descendents of the tribe of Menasheh all married cousins from the clan of Makhir ben Menasheh. This is the very same clan that was one of those who captured the territory of the Gil'ad and settled there. Thus, the daughters of the ma'apilim end up in union with the sons of the "anti-ma'apilim." In effect, to use kabbalistic imagery, we have another stage in the "tikkun" of the sin of the ma'apilim. The children of Menasheh go and fight for the Land and are rewarded by God, thus reversing the sin of the ancestors who attempted to battle against His wishes!

D.

In conclusion, we now have before us a complete picture. The second generation re-experienced many of the seminal events of the first generation. Since the mission of the first generation had gone awry, the second generation now had to relive their history, overcome it, and continue. They picked up where their parents had left off, while confronting the formative experiences of Yetziat Mitzrayim (see the Balak shiur) and Matan Torah (see above). In addition, they confronted the major crisis-mistakes of the first generation, the egel, meraglim and ma'apilim and were able to emerge victorious. After the long detours of the desert both in their parents' experience and even in their own, they were now at Arvot Moav, ready to receive Moshe's last charge before entry into the promised land.