

PARASHAT CHUKKAT

Moshe's Leadership and the Transition of Generations

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I. "Moshe Grew Angry"

Moshe's angry response to the incident of Mei Meriva differs drastically from all of his prior responses to Benei Yisrael's repeated complaints and grumbling. Previously, Moshe and Aharon had prayed on their behalf and often appealed to them to turn to God rather than quarrel. Even during the severe crisis at Kivrot ha-Ta'ava, when Moshe simply could not relate to Benei Yisrael or show understanding for their complaint, he exhibited no anger towards them. He rather turned to God and asked that he be relieved of the leadership.

Suddenly, at Mei Meriva, a rift develops between him and the nation. The first expression of this change is the paralysis that grips Moshe upon hearing the nation's protest (Bemidbar 20:6). Rather than responding with his usual petition to God or appeal to the people, Moshe instead withdraws to the Tent of Meeting and falls on his face.

Moreover, the anger reflected in Moshe's admonition - "Listen, you rebels, shall we get water for you out of this rock?" (20:10) - is not a single, isolated event, but rather marks the beginning of a process that characterizes the second half of Sefer Bemidbar. Throughout the final chapters we encounter time and time again friction and lack of communication between the leader of Israel and the flock under his charge. We can point to at least four incidents that reflect a distance, if not alienation, that has infiltrated Moshe's relationship with the people: a) Mei Meriva; b) Ba'al Pe'or; c) the battle against Midyan; d) the story of the tribes of Gad and Reuven.

Such a radical change requires us to examine the transformation that occurred and search for its roots. Why does Moshe change his mode of leadership? Why does he now begin preaching and scolding, as opposed to his earlier approach?

II. One Generation Goes, Another Comes

We must first note that Mei Meriva marks the transition of generations. We no longer find ourselves in the first generation, the generation of the Exodus, but rather in the next generation, raised in the desert. The parents have died and been buried, and their children have taken their places. Sefer Bemidbar can be divided into two sections: the first half, which deals with the first generation that never earned entry into the Land (chapters 1-18), and the second half, which tells of the second generation, whose members are now prepared to settle the Land (chapters 20-36).

In between the two halves stands the section of the para aduma (red heifer). At first glance, the section of the para aduma bears no topical relevance to the plot of Sefer Bemidbar. Its halakhic content renders it far more suitable for Sefer Vayikra. Furthermore, Chazal claim that this section was actually transmitted on the day when the Mishkan was consecrated; it thus even chronologically precedes the sections of the Torah in which it is embedded.

I heard from my grandfather and teacher, Rav Yosef Dov ha-Levi Soloveitchik zt"l, that the location of Parashat Para comes to express the despair and tragedy of Benei

Yisrael's life in the wilderness. As a result of the decree of death issued against that generation, their lives became an ongoing confrontation with death. Parashat Para, which involves primarily the halakhic means of dealing with death, became a central feature of their lives. Its location, at this point in the Sefer, reveals for us - if only somewhat - the tragedy of this generation, living in the shadow of impending death.

It emerges, then, that Parashat Para provides us with a synopsis of those thirty-eight years. It marks the point of transition between the second year, when the decree of death was issued, and fortieth year, when the generation of the exodus had died out and the people were ready to enter the land.

Thus, the story of Mei Meriva is the first incident that takes place in the new period, in the fortieth year. Herein lies the key to understanding the change that occurs in Moshe's approach towards the nation. This claim, that Moshe altered his attitude towards the nation as a result of the generation change, I was also privileged to hear many times from my grandfather. He explained that Moshe was prepared to tolerate the conduct of the generation of the exodus, given his understanding of their upbringing. The first generation was raised in bondage, constantly in fear of the sword and the whip. Needless to say, under these conditions children did not enjoy a religious education. Their entire lives were marked by the struggle for survival. Rather than dreaming as youths of the perfection of the world, the children of Benei Yisrael went to sleep at night with the dread of the following day weighing on their minds.

Moshe understood that the first generation was incapable of overcoming its past and rising to a high level of trust in God, believing that he would provide for them in the wilderness. He therefore pinned his hopes on the generation of the children. Given their upbringing under the clouds of glory and in the shade of Mount Sinai, and considering that they never had to experience the suffering of the Egyptian crucible, Moshe saw the generation of the children as the ones who would correct the mistakes of their fathers. They represented the nation's future.

With great energy and enthusiasm, Moshe and Yehoshua invest all their strength in educating the second generation. Moshe feels capable of shaping the spiritual world of the generation that lives under his protection from their earliest age. They drew all

their education from him in total purity, without any external influences or pressures. In such a situation, Moshe expects that the mistakes of their parents would not repeat themselves in the new generation, for he attributed the parents' complaints and lack of trust to the circumstances in which they lived, rather than to human nature.

The series of complaints by the second generation, beginning with Mei Meriva, reduced to naught all of Moshe's assumptions and hopes with regard to this generation. Hence his anger, the anger of frustration, of the shattering of hopes and bitter disappointment with Benei Yisrael, with that generation in particular and the human being in general, finds expression in his chiding of the nation. Their fear over the lack of water and their complaints about the manna parallel those of the first generation, as if they have learned nothing. It is this very fact that brings Moshe to the breaking point.

III. A Minor Sin, A Severe Punishment

In light of what we have seen, we can assess Moshe's barred entry into the land and the transition of leadership from him to Yehoshua. At first glance, the explanation seems explicit in the text: Moshe sinned at Mei Meriva, and he is punished with a decree forbidding his entry into the land. The Almighty judges the righteous exactly, and as a result of this sin, Moshe and Aharon are denied entry into the land.

The matter is not, however, quite so simple. This very point, that even the slightest transgression can result in such harsh judgment, is precisely what troubles the reader. Moreover, why focus on this particular wrongdoing? Indeed, Rashi (20:12) notes that, at first glance, Moshe's remarks to God at Kivrot ha-Ta'ava (11:22) appear far worse than his wrongdoing here at Mei Meriva. Why does this sin in particular bar Moshe's entry into the land?

We must also understand the punishment of Aharon, who did not play a significant role in hitting the rock, yet shared Moshe's punishment.

In light of these questions, which strengthen one another, we may suggest viewing Moshe's denied entry into the land against the background of the processes we have discussed. The break that occurred between him and Benei Yisrael, which found expression in the anger and sense of helplessness that pervades the second half of Sefer Bemidbar, forms the basis of the denial of his right to enter the land. His leadership ability has weakened, and he can no longer lead Benei Yisrael proudly into their land.

In order to clarify this idea and reconcile it with the text, we must first resort to the verses towards the beginning of Sefer Devarim. There Moshe links the decree prohibiting his entry into the land with the sin of the scouts. In truth, however, upon examining the verse more closely, we see that it does not attribute Moshe's punishment to the sin of the spies itself. Rather, the results of the sin caused God's decree to affect Moshe, as well: "Because of you the Lord was incensed with me, too, and He said: You shall not enter it, either" (Devarim 1:37). How did the incident of spies impact upon Moshe? Why would the decree include him if he himself did not sin with the rest of the nation?

The answer is provided in an adjacent verse describing the punishment issued for the sin of the scouts: "The Lord heard the sound of your words and was angry. He vowed: Not one of these men, **THIS EVIL GENERATION**, shall see the good land that I swore to give to your fathers" (Devarim 1:34-35). The verse implies that the decree was not issued against each individual, prohibiting him from entering the land as a result of his personal sin in the incident of the spies. Rather, God decreed that the generation will not enter.

It was therefore decreed that Moshe and Aharon, too, will be denied the right to enter the land, for the generation that they lead and to which they belong may not enter. Moshe and Aharon did not sin in the incident of the spies, and God expresses no anger regarding their actions during this episode. Nevertheless, the punishment resulting from the spies leads to the denial of their right of entry, given their membership in this generation. Moshe thus claims that the Almighty was incensed with him, too, as a result of the sin of the spies.

IV. Each Generation and Its Leaders

As discussed above, the incident of Mei Meriva demonstrated that Moshe could no longer serve as Benei Yisrael's leader due to the generation gap between them. Not the sin, but rather the rift seals the fate of Moshe and Aharon and denies them the privilege of leading the armies of Israel into the land. They belonged to the previous generation, the generation that was fated to die in the desert. A careful reading reveals that this point emerges from the verses themselves. Each of the three verses that attribute Moshe's denied entry into the land to the incident of Mei Meriva (Bemidbar 20:12, 27:14, Devarim 32:51) emphasizes Moshe and Aharon's lack of success in sanctifying God's Name at Mei Meriva.

In light of this, we can explain how Aharon's barred entry into the land relates to the episode of Mei Meriva. If the sin of Mei Meriva had been the decisive factor, then since he played a minor role in this affair, he would not have been punished so severely. However, once the chain of events at Mei Meriva determines that they are no longer successful as leaders, they cannot enter the land as leaders of the younger generation. Regarding this point, no distinction exists between Moshe and Aharon.

The anger expressed at Mei Meriva is not a one-time expression of frustration, but rather a consistent phenomenon that accompanies Moshe's relationship with the second generation. The anger and bitterness that bursts forth with the declaration, "Listen, you rebels!" do not result from a momentary, tragic loss of control, but are rather a symptom of the rift and lack of communication between Moshe and the people. It becomes clear that Moshe cannot lead the nation for much longer, and if he does lead he will be unable to sanctify God's Name as he did in the past, given the abyss that has grown between him and the generation that will enter the land. Consequently, Moshe cannot proceed into the land as leader, and must therefore die in the wilderness as did the other members of the generation to whom God's decree of death applied.

In truth, Chazal already noted that Moshe's prohibited entry into the land involved his role as national leader, not his personal status. Moreover, according to the Midrash

(Devarim Rabba 9:9), Moshe indeed could have entered the land as a private citizen had he so desired; no decree was ever issued against him in this regard:

[Moshe] said before Him: Master of the world, let Yehoshua assume my title, and I will live.

The Almighty said: Do for him what he does for you.

Moshe immediately arose and went to Yehoshua's home. Yehoshua was frightened and said, "Moshe, my rabbi, come next to me." They left to go, and Moshe walked on Yehoshua's left. They entered the Tent of Meeting, and the pillar of cloud descended and stood in between them.

When the pillar of cloud left, Moshe went to Yehoshua and said: What did God say to you?

Yehoshua said to him: When He would speak with you, did I know what He said to you?

At that moment Moshe cried and said: One hundred deaths are preferable to a single feeling of envy!...

Once he accepted death, the Almighty began comforting him. He said to him: I swear, in this world you led My children, so in the future, too, I will lead them through you.

The Midrash indicates that God did not issue a decree against Moshe son of Amram as a private person; rather, he was denied permission to enter the land as the nation's leader. He was permitted to enter as a private citizen, but he would then have to submit his title and leadership to someone of the next generation to lead them in the land. However, after forty years during which his entire being was devoted to caring for the nation and their many needs, he can no longer live without full involvement in the national leadership. He therefore prefers leaving this world. The Almighty's words of consolation, promising him the leadership over Israel in the future, exemplifies the extent to which Moshe's identity is bound together with his role as Benei Yisrael's leader, and how far removed he has come from the days when the young lad fled to Midyan in order to be excused from the involvement in his nation's needs.

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