

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

Parashat Beha'alotekha

Zealousness for Moshe

By Dr. Jonathan Grossman

In this week's parasha we read of Benei Yisrael's departure from Har Sinai. Following a long encampment at the foot of the mountain, and the construction of the Mishkan, we read:

"They traveled from God's mountain a three-day journey, and the Ark of God's Covenant traveled before them a three day-journey to scout them a resting place. God's cloud was upon them by day as they traveled from the encampment." (Bemidbar 10:33)

Now we begin the long and tiring journey (destined to last forty years), a journey involving various complaints, some ascents and primarily downfalls.

In one of my VBM shiurim last year, I dealt with the parallel between this journey and the first journey which Benei Yisrael made from Egypt to Har Sinai (described in Parashat Shelach). In both cases there are complaints on the part of the nation, generally built along the same lines. (Last year's shiur compared two instances where Moshe was required to draw water from a rock.) In addition to the similarity in complaints, during both journeys Benei Yisrael are forced to deal with an external enemy who attacks them (Amalek on the way to Har Sinai, and the Kena'ani, who dwell in the Negev, in our journey towards Arvot Mo'av).

Even the very beginning of the journey as quoted above corresponds to the beginning of the previous journey (from Egypt to Har Sinai). Corresponding to the words here, "They traveled from God's mountain a three-day journey," we read there: "Moshe led Israel from the Yam Suf... and they walked a journey of three days" (Shemot 15:22).

Both journeys begin with a three-day hike, a self-contained unit of walking, and after these three days the nation complains about the difficulties of the road.

Let us now turn our attention to the second complaints which Benei Yisrael voiced during these two journeys: in our parasha - the long complaint at Kivrot Ha-Ta'ava concerning meat (11:4-35); and its parallel - the longest complaint recorded during the first journey, in the wilderness of Sin.

The subject of both complaints is food. In Benei Yisrael's complaint on the way to Har Sinai, they claim:

"If only we had died by God's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots eating our fill of bread; for you have brought us out to this wilderness to kill this entire congregation by starvation." (Shemot 16:3)

Similarly, we read in our parasha:

"The mixed multitude that was among them began to lust, and Benei Yisrael too cried once again, saying: Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt for free, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic. But now our soul is dried up for lack of everything..." (11:4-6)

In both instances Benei Yisrael long for the food which was given to them in Egypt and which they lack in the desert. The structure of the complaints is similar. At first they ask, "If only" (lit. "Who would give...") and "Who will feed us..."; thereafter they reminisce about the gastronomic bounty that was their lot in Egypt and which their stomachs lack in the desert.

However, the very comparison between these two complaints shows the complaint in our parasha in a critical light. The first complaint, on the way to Har Sinai, was engendered by the fear of hunger: "...to kill this entire congregation by starvation." Given this prospect, it is easier for us to identify with the substance of the complaint. It is certainly not easy for parents to see their children going hungry, and they have no food to offer them to assuage the hunger.

By contrast, in the complaint recorded in our parasha, the nation complains that the situation in the desert is such that "Now our soul is dried up for lack of everything except this manna before our eyes..." (11:6). We are not dealing here with starvation; the issue is one of the menu! There is quite enough food to feed every person in the camp, but in the eyes of the complainers the menu is not sufficiently rich and varied.

The text itself hints at this critical reading, for immediately following the complaint, before recording Moshe's reaction, the Torah comments: "And the manna was like coriander seed, and its color was like the color of crystal... and its taste was like the taste of oil cake" (11:7-8). The purpose of this comment, describing the merits of the manna which Benei Yisrael have eaten during their desert travels ever since the first complaint in the wilderness of Sin (which we are comparing with this complaint), is to show that the complaint is not justified. True, there is no meat for them in the desert, but they could certainly make do with the manna which descends daily from the heavens. This type of criticism is nowhere to be found in the complaint in the wilderness of Sin, for there the manna had not yet begun to come down; in fact, it only began descending as a result of their complaint.

The Torah also has another way of expressing disapproval of this complaint. At the beginning of the first complaint, the text describes the complainers in a general way: "And Benei Yisrael said to them..." In our parasha, on the other hand, the wording is more complex: "And the mixed multitude that was among them began to lust, and Benei Yisrael too cried once again, saying..." The complaint is instigated by the "mixed multitude that was among them," and only after they begin complaining do "Benei Yisrael, too," once again start crying and complaining. This introduction to the episode seeks to hint again that the complaint here is unfounded, and that the lusting for meat is simply an excuse to start complaining.

It is therefore no wonder that Moshe, faced with this complaint, begins to feel that he has no more strength. For the first time since assuming leadership, he bemoans his fate and complains to God about the difficulty of leading this nation in the desert:

"Why have you afflicted your servant, and why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of this entire nation upon me? Did I then conceive this people? Did I give birth to them, that You should say to me, Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling child, to the land which You promised to their fathers... If this is what You are doing to me, please kill me, if I have found favor in Your eyes, and let me not see my own suffering." (11:11-15)

As mentioned, the background Moshe's harsh outburst is the nation's unjustified complaint. During the first journey, towards Har Sinai, the attitude of the text towards the various complaints was more forgiving, in contrast to this journey, where the expectations of them (and of Moshe) are higher.

In the wake of this complaint and Moshe's plea, God appoints seventy elders to assist Moshe in the task of leadership. This is not merely a political role; the position is also a religious-spiritual one. We learn this from the way in which the elders were

appointed. While Yitro's suggestion to appoint judges was carried out by Moshe's selecting appropriate individuals, here there is a spiritual transformation: Moshe's spirit is made to rest upon the elders. All this takes place in the Ohel Moed, with God Himself descending and granting the elders prophecy.

In this context, I would like to examine the final two parshiyot in this week's parasha: our story - the nation's complaint and the consequent appointment of the elders, and the incident of Miriam's leprosy. It seems that the juxtaposition of these two episodes is not coincidental, and literary parallels between them point to a strong link between them:

1. In both instances, Moshe must enter the Ohel Moed (Tent of Meeting) along with other people. Regarding the inauguration of the elders, we read, "Gather for Me seventy of Israel's elders... and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you" (11:16). Similarly, during the incident of Miriam, God orders, "Come out, you three, to the Tent of Meeting" (12:4).

2. In both cases, God descends in a cloud to speak with those who have gathered around the Tent (see 11:25 and 12:5).

3. God's anger is incensed in both instances (11:10 and 12:9).

4. The Hebrew expression "a-s-f" is employed in both instances as meaning re-entry, a usage rarely found in Tanakh. In the context of the appointment of the elders - "Moshe then reentered the camp" (11:30); with regard to Miriam - "Let her be shut out of the camp for seven days, and then let her reenter" (12:14).

5. The elements of imprisonment and banishment are presented in both contexts. After the elders receive the divine spirit, Eldad and Medad prophesy in the camp, leading Yehoshua to exclaim, "My lord, Moshe, imprison them!" (11:28). This suggestion, which is not implemented with regard to Eldad and Medad, actually occurs in the following parasha: "Let her [Miriam] be shut out of the camp... Miriam was shut out of the camp seven days" (12:14-5).

6. Lastly and most importantly, a fundamental thematic connection exists between the two episodes. Both these incidents raise the critical issue of the nature of Moshe's prophecy. After the elders were enlisted, Yehoshua fervently defends Moshe's stature, refusing to accept the fact that two other men (who were not in the Tent of Meeting with Moshe, and thus did not receive their prophecy from him) are speaking prophecy in the Israelite camp. He therefore suggests that Moshe take appropriate punitive measures. In the following story, God Himself stands up for Moshe and his prophecy.

After Aharon and Miriam take issue with the uniqueness of Moshe's prophecy, God appears to them and reaffirms Moshe's exclusivity:

"Not so with My servant Moshe; he is trusted throughout My household. With Him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of God. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moshe?" (12:8)

These parallels lead us to believe that these two incidents share a common motif, underscored by the literary link between the two sections - the zealous concern for Moshe's prophecy. Whereas this zealousness is expressed by Yehoshua in the first episode, God Himself intervenes on Moshe's behalf in the second.

Why does the Torah equate these two expressions of zealous concern for Moshe's stature? It seems that the incident of Miriam transmits a certain message, one that evolves from the previous story, the appointment of the elders.

The commissioning of the elders marks the end of Moshe's exclusivity as a prophet. Although the elders' prophecy was merely temporary according to many commentators (depending upon the interpretation of 11:25), nevertheless, the very fact that they prophesied and the "spirit of God" rested upon them could potentially undermine Moshe's unique stature in the eyes of the people.

Indeed, such tension emerges in the immediate aftermath of the elders' prophecy. Yehoshua instinctively jumps to defend his mentor's honor, insisting that Moshe's special stature be preserved. He fears that the proliferation of other prophets throughout the Israelite camp could result in the collapse of Moshe's leadership. Moshe, the most humble of men (12:3), not only ignores his disciple's concerns, but even rejoices over the prophecy that has now been granted to others.

The next episode, that of Miriam and Aharon's inappropriate speech about their brother, must be understood in a similar vein. This incident demonstrates that Moshe's stature has been questioned not only by the common-folk, but within the leadership, as well - among Moshe's very siblings: "They said, Has God spoken only through Moshe? Has He not spoken through us, as well?" (11:2). Whereas Moshe himself forgoes his honor and overlooks the threat to his exclusive stature, the Almighty Himself stands up for the Jewish leader, and does not allow the infringement upon his leadership. As God condemns Aharon and Miriam's conduct, He appears as a lover standing up for his beloved, refusing to remain idle as Moshe is criticized and his spiritual leadership questioned.

Thus, our parasha features two incidents where Moshe's stature is defended: first by Yehoshua, whose zeal for his mentor's honor is rejected by Moshe, and thereafter by God, who reaffirms the exclusive nature of Moshe's prophecy and relationship to the Almighty, even in the presence of other prophets.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish and David Silverberg)

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