

## PARASHAT BEHA'ALOTEKHA

### Moshe vs. "the Lustful": Leadership in Crisis

By Rav Elchanan Samet

a. Two themes in the story of Kivrot Ha-Ta'avah

The recounting of the events that took place at Kivrot Ha-Ta'avah stretches over 32 pesukim in chapter 11, from pasuk 4 until the end of the chapter at pasuk 35. The most obvious difficulty arising from even a cursory review of the narrative is that it includes two different themes, which are intertwined throughout.

The first subject is the complaint of those who desired meat and the other delicacies of Egypt, the discussion between Hashem and Moshe concerning the satisfaction of their desire, and the arrival of the quails, bringing the punishment of the sinners. This subject is dealt with in 18 pesukim of the story.

The second subject involves Moshe's complaint as to his inability to lead the nation on his own, Hashem's answer and His instructions in this regard, and their realization by Moshe. This subject occupies 14 pesukim of the story.

The alternation between these two subjects throughout the story divides it into six sections:

a. 4-10

Complaint of the lustful

b. 11-15

Moshe's complaint

c. 16-17

Hashem's response to Moshe - seventy elders

d. 18-23

Hashem's response to the nation

e. 24-30

Appointment of the seventy elders

f. 31-35

Appearance of the quail

The connection between the two subjects contained in the story is to be found in section b. The crying of the nation to Moshe with their demand for meat is the apparent cause of Moshe's complaint to God:

(13) "From where do I have meat to give this whole nation, for they cry to me saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat?'"

From this point onwards, Moshe's complaint and that of the nation are treated separately. In Hashem's response to Moshe we see a clear separation of the two issues (and therefore the response is divided into two units – c. and d.); and again in the

description of the realization of the solutions, (e. and f.), we detect no connection between them.

We therefore have two apparently separate stories, which from a common starting point (in unit b.), develop independently. Why, then, are they intertwined in the narrative? The common time-frame is an unsatisfactory explanation. Why, we must ask, was it specifically this complaint of the nation that drove Moshe to burst out with his complaint? And secondly, why is the addressing of Moshe's complaint bound up with the addressing of the nation's complaint on the factual, real level? The complaint of the nation could first have been dealt with and only then attention paid to Moshe's complaint (while what in fact occurs is the opposite).

Thirdly, even if this alternation reflects what really took place, the literary description is not bound to follow the chronological reality. A biblical story holds a special message, molded in its specific literary nature – in its structure and style and all its means of expression. The story is not an exact, mechanical replica of reality, but rather a selective, artistic representation of parts of reality in such a way as to lend them special significance. Therefore the mixture of two different stories within the same joint framework presents a literary problem, since it may harm both of them.

#### b. Unity of the story based on structure and guiding word

In a very simple manner we may join each adjacent pair of units under a single brief heading which serves as their common denominator:

Units a-b The complaints

Units c-d Hashem's responses

Units e-f the solutions put into effect

This structure already hints at the connection between the two subjects dealt with in the story.

One of the outstanding stylistic techniques of the biblical narrative is the use of a "guiding word." It is repeated throughout the story, or in some of its parts, in such a way as to draw our attention: it usually appears seven times, or some multiple of 7; sometimes it is found several times within a small number of pesukim, other times it is spread throughout the entire story, but at strategic moments; sometimes the guiding word changes its meaning and its context, therefore hinting at change in the course of the story; at times the guiding word serves as a stylistic cordon unifying all the different parts of the story. Of course, there are many more possibilities.

Is there a guiding word in our story that serves as a stylistic cordon, connecting its two subjects and its three sections? The root 'a-s-f' fulfills this function:

1. (4) And the multitude (asafsuf) that was in their midst began to lust...
2. (16) And Hashem said to Moshe, Gather to me (asfah-li) seventy men of the elders of Israel...
3. (22) ... shall all the fish of the sea be gathered (ye'asef) for them to suffice them?
4. (24) ... And he gathered (va-ye'esof) seventy men of the elders of Israel
5. (30) And Moshe returned (was gathered – va-ye'asef) into the camp, he and the elders of Israel
6. (32) ... and they gathered (va-ya'asfu) the quails
7. ... and the least gathered (asaf) ten homarim...

Four appearances of the guiding word (1,3,6,7) belong to the complaint of the lustful and its solution, while the other three belong to the problem of Moshe's leadership. Attention should be paid to the fact that each of the three parts of the story opens with the guiding word.

We have therefore located a stylistic element that unifies the story as a whole. But here the following key question arises: what is the internal connection between the 'asafsuf' (multitude) and the 'asefah' (gathering) of the seventy elders? And how is the gathering (he'asfut) of Moshe and the elders of Israel into the camp related to the gathering (isuf) of the quails that are lying about all over the camp?

There are other guiding words in the story, and they too serve as a unifying factor, but this word will suffice us for the purposes of a systematic analysis.

c. The gravity of the complaint of the lustful: circumstances and timing

The gravity of the crying of the lustful becomes apparent when compared with a parallel event described in Shmot 16:

(Shmot 16) 1: ... And all the congregation of the children of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin... on the fifteenth day of the second month after the exodus from Egypt.

2: And all the congregation of the children of Israel complained to Moshe and to Aharon in the wilderness.

3: And the children of Israel said to them, If only we had died by Hashem's hand in the land of Egypt, where we sat by the flesh pots and ate our fill of bread. For you have brought us out to this wilderness to kill this whole congregation with hunger.

The complaint seems reminiscent of the complaint in our narrative:

4: Who will feed us meat;

5: We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt for nothing,

6: and now our soul is dried up, there is nothing...

But in fact there are two fundamental differences between these two stories:

The timing: the story in Shmot takes place just after the exodus, just one month after the nation leaves Egypt. The nation is as yet unused to the new life of freedom, and every difficulty gives rise to complaint.

The story in Bamidbar, in contrast, takes place (10:11) "in the second year in the second month;" i.e., more than a year after the exodus, close to a year after the revelation at Sinai and a short time after the establishment of the mishkan. After all these preparatory events one might have expected the nation to have reached a higher level.

The circumstances: The complaint of the nation in Sefer Shmot reflects a certain measure of objective justification. This complaint was raised before the manna started falling, and the nation was truly afraid of dying of hunger in the wilderness. It was only in the wake of their complaint that the manna began to fall every morning, and in the evening the quails descended and covered the camp.

The complaint in Sefer Bamidbar, on the other hand, arises not from a shortage of food and a fear of starvation but rather from a lust for meat. The manna had continued to fall regularly for the entire year since the time of the event described in Sefer Shmot. Corresponding to the complaint of the nation concerning the manna (6) that "our soul is DRIED UP, there is nothing, except for this manna before our eyes," the Torah describes over the course of three pesukim (7-9) the advantages of the manna: its taste, "like the taste of OIL CAKE," the way it fell "when the dew fell upon the camp," its pleasing appearance and its range of possibilities for preparation. Thus it is not the manna that is "dried up" but rather the soul of the nation, as they declare.

There are two grave aspects to the crying of the nation. Firstly, this is an expression of ingratitude towards Hashem's mercies to them in the desert, with false slander of the

wonderful miracle of the manna that kept them alive from day to day. Secondly, their words reflect a longing for the life of degrading slavery in Egypt and their preference for this over the life of freedom, which did admittedly involve spiritual tension and endurance of the journeying through the desert, but not hunger and deprivation.

Therefore this is not a normal complaint with some objective, factual basis that may be addressed in order to solve it. The complaint here is nothing more than a pure expression of the lowly spirit of the nation. It represents a profound spiritual regression from all the events of the past year: from the exodus and all its miracles, from the revelation at Sinai and from the mishkan. And no less importantly, it represents an abandonment of the vision of the future to which their journey in the desert is directed – the entry into the Promised Land.

The complaint of the lustful for meat prolongs and intensifies the previous sin described in the three pesukim that open our chapter, which serve as a sort of introduction to our story. "And the nation was like complainers; it was evil in Hashem's ears, and Hashem heard and His anger burned...." Here, too, there is no objective basis to their complaint other than the fact that the journey to the land of Canaan has recommenced after a prolonged stay at Har Sinai.

These two complaints, that of "the complainers" and that of "the lustful," arise at the start of Bnei Yisrael's joyful journey towards the land of their destiny. Prolonged preparations have been made during their year-long stay at Har Sinai for the moment of their departure. Now the moment arrives:

(10:11) And it happened in the second year in the second month on the twentieth of the month that the cloud lifted from above the mishkan of the testimony.

(12) And Bnei Yisrael took up their journey from the wilderness of Sinai...

(33) And the ark of Hashem's covenant traveled before them... (34) And the cloud of Hashem was upon them by day as they traveled...

And here, just as the action begins, the nation is responsible for a terrible anti-climax, causing Hashem frustration and anger: (1) "And Hashem heard and His anger burned"; (10) "And Moshe heard the nation crying by its families, each man at the entrance to his tent, and Hashem's anger burned greatly...."

d. From the loftiest heights to the lowliest pits

What is the significance of this event from the subjective perspective of Moshe, the leader of the nation? The event described at the end of chapter 10, prior to moving away from Har Sinai, opens a window to his soul. We find there a dialogue between Moshe and his father-in-law, in which Moshe invites Yitro to accompany the nation of Israel "to the place concerning which Hashem said, I shall give it to you." In this dialogue Moshe is depicted as full of enthusiasm and limitless optimistic aspirations with regard to the future:

(29) We are traveling to the place concerning which Hashem said, I shall give it to you. Come with us and we shall be good to you, for Hashem has spoken good of Israel.

(32) And it shall be if you come with us, then that good that Hashem will do for us, the same good we shall do for you."

The word "good" (tov) is repeated a total of five times in these two utterances of Moshe, as an object and as a verb. There is a sense of Divine good that is about to overflow towards Israel, to the extent that it can also even include others. This 'good' is obviously related to the entry into the good land.

Let us now turn our attention to the anti-climax of chapter 11:

(1) And the nation were like complainers; it was EVIL ("ra") in Hashem's ears, and Hashem heard and His anger burned...

(10) And Moshe heard the nation complaining by their families... and the anger of Hashem burned greatly, and it was EVIL in Moshe's eyes.

(11) And Moshe said to Hashem, Why have You done EVIL with your servant... to place the burden of this entire nation upon me?

(15) If You deal thus with me, please kill me... and let me not see my suffering (lit. EVIL).

(18) And to the nation you shall say... For you have cried in Hashem's ears saying... It was GOOD for us in EGYPT...

Corresponding to the five expressions of "good" prior to their departure, chapter 11 – which describes the initial journeys in the desert – describes their opposite: not "Hashem has spoken GOOD of Israel," but rather "the nation were like complainers, EVIL in Hashem's ears." This contrast already indicates the degree of their failure, but at this point it has not yet affected Moshe. But when he hears the crying of the nation lustful for meat he suddenly perceives the abyss before him, the impossible distance between the aspirations for the future and the appreciation of the greatness of the hour that beat within him, and the childishness of the nation crying for meat and longing for its degrading past, "for it was GOOD for us in Egypt" – "and it was EVIL in Moshe's eyes."

The psychological crisis facing the nation's leader is now unavoidable - from the loftiest heights Moshe has fallen to the lowest depths of despair. What formerly appeared as a movement towards the limitless good that Hashem would bestow upon Israel becomes now, in Moshe's monologue, the evil that Hashem has done to him by placing upon him the burden of leading "this whole nation" to "the land that You promised their forefathers," and he concludes with a request that indicates his wish to be released from his task – "and let me not see my misfortune." As elevated as Moshe's spirit was at the time of his great hopes, so deep now is his despair. This is a natural reaction in face of such great disappointment in the nation, and Moshe's psychological state finds expression in his speech.

e. Moshe's monologue of complaint (pesukim 11-15)

An analysis of Moshe's speech, where the two themes are explicitly connected, reveals its sophisticated literary structure and internal unity. As we shall see below, pasuk 13 – "From where do I have meat..." – is not an "intertwining" of Bnei Yisrael's complaint with his own personal one; rather, it is a vital ingredient without which the speech loses its main point.

A biblical monologue is generally a sophisticated literary unit which should be given special attention in its analysis. Moshe's speech is composed of two halves with an almost equal number of words, with a chiasmic structure of correspondence. Let us firstly examine this correspondence:

(11) Why HAVE YOU DONE EVIL to your servant

and why HAVE I NOT FOUND FAVOR IN YOUR EYES

that You place THE BURDEN OF THIS WHOLE NATION upon me?

(12) Did I conceive THIS WHOLE NATION, did I give birth to it,

that You have said to me, "Carry them in your bosom" like a nurse carries a baby, to the land that You promised to their forefathers?

(13) From where do I have meat to give THIS WHOLE NATION

that is crying to me, saying, "Give us meat that we may eat"?

(14) I am unable alone TO BEAR THIS WHOLE NATION for it is too heavy for me.

(15) If You deal with me thus, please kill me, IF I HAVE FOUND FAVOR IN YOUR EYES, and let me not see MY MISFORTUNE (lit. evil).

The first half comprises two rhetorical questions, each of which is double (why...and why...?; Did I... did I?). Each of these dual questions negates the existing situation in

which Moshe is the leader of Israel. The first question negates the perception that Hashem selected Moshe for leadership because He wished to bestow good upon him and because Moshe found favor in His eyes. The opposite is true - from Moshe's perspective, the giving of leadership is an evil that Hashem is doing towards him, and is an expression of the fact that Moshe has not found favor in Hashem's sight.

The second dual negates the perception that leadership has been bestowed upon Moshe on the basis of some biological relationship with the nation, like that which exists between a mother and the fruit of her womb. Here the monologue adopts a metaphor that is nothing more than a continuation of the double negation: obviously Moshe did not conceive or give birth to the whole nation, but Hashem's bestowing the leadership upon him has made him into a nurse carrying a baby in her bosom.

This metaphor gives rise to such a positive image in the mind of the listener that it seems almost to achieve the opposite of Moshe's intention: it is true that Moshe is not a "nurse," but perhaps that is truly the appropriate way for the leader of a young nation to perceive his role, to gird himself with unending patience and to understand that he has to take care of his nation like a mother taking care of her child. This positive tone in Moshe's words is strengthened in the concluding words of the first half: "... to carry them to the land that You promised to their forefathers." Is this not the life mission of Moshe himself, to carry Israel to their destined land?

The second half of the speech opens with another rhetorical question, the third. Now we discover the reason for his previous questions in the first half. From the point of view of its position in the speech this question corresponds to that which concludes the first half; these are two rhetorical questions whose answer is in the negative; the expression "this whole nation" is repeated at the start of each, and even their compositional structure is similar: "Did I... that You have said to me...;" "From where do I have... that they cry to me...."

But what is important in the parallel between the two questions is neither their linguistic nor their compositional similarity, but rather the harshly grotesque contrast between them. The image of a young infant at his mother's breast is an idyllic one, full of gentleness. More even than the infant wishes to suckle, the mother wishes to nurse

him. The infant himself is helpless, unable to voice his wish to his mother, while the mother's milk is within herself, ready to be given to him. If the relationship between Moshe and the nation was like this, the monologue would arouse no identification with Moshe's complaint. But at the beginning of the second half the "infant" displays teeth, opens a demanding mouth and shouts at its "nurse" with hysterical crying of its multitudes, "Give us meat that we may eat!" The infant, hungry for its mother's MILK in the first half, has undergone an artistic metamorphosis and has become an angry nation demanding of its leader - its nurse – not to drink mother's milk but rather to EAT MEAT. And so the nurse asks, "From where do I have meat?"

The revolutionary change that has taken place in the nature of the infant and in the relationship between it and its nurse is a frightening mockery, and it explains retroactively Moshe's complaint. We may say that this reversal characterizes the difference between Moshe's leadership of Israel UNTIL NOW, which was in some ways "as a nurse carries an infant," and the change that has now taken place with the complaint of the nation lusting after meat, a change that has driven Moshe to a crisis.

Now we reach the conclusion of the monologue, expressed as requests, in inverse order to the components of the dual question at the start of the speech, as we see in the table comparing them.

An analysis of the speech has thus shown that it is only the event that preceded it – the crying of the nation lusting for meat – could have given rise to it. Its content, artistic structure and rhetorical weight all depend on that event. Moshe's complaint and the complaint of the Jews are two sides of a single coin.

#### f. The gathering and the spirit

This is a story of leadership in crisis, but not in the sense in which it is usually understood in a Western democracy, where such a crisis is generally the result of personal failure on the part of the leader or of a loss of faith in him on the part of his nation. The crisis in our story arises from fundamentally opposite circumstances - it is

the leader who has lost faith in the nation, after the nation has revealed its heart's desires. In the face of such lowliness the leader feels that he has not the strength to lead onward a nation that does not share his vision and wishes to go backwards, to the "good" that was their lot in Egypt, to the fish that they ate there "for nothing."

The solution that Hashem proposes is seemingly a technical one - seventy men of the elders of Israel will share with Moshe the burden of the nation, and for this purpose Hashem will bestow some of Moshe's spirit upon them. But how will they help Moshe? The problem here is not a technical one, as we found in Sefer Shmot, at the beginning of parashat Yitro. There what was required was the establishment of a hierarchical judicial system which would save Moshe from having to deal with every legal problem that arose within the nation. But here the question is how to extricate the nation from its lowly spiritual state, and how would these seventy elders help in this regard? Only in the formal sense can this be considered a response to Moshe: he says (14) "I cannot alone bear this whole nation, for it is too heavy for me," and Hashem answers him by saying (17) "And they shall bear with you the burden of the nation, and you shall not bear it alone." It is difficult to understand how this is actually going to help.

A hint at the solution to this question involves stylistic sensitivity to the guiding words that thread their way through our story. The key to the decline that appears in the nation lies in the "multitude": (4) "And the multitude that was in their midst lusted..." – this opens the story. It is this group that dragged the rest of the nation after it: "And ALSO Bnei Yisrael sat and cried."

What is hinted at in Hashem's response to Moshe is that corresponding to the 'asafuf (multitude) that is lusting and drawing the nation after them, there must be an 'asefah' (gathering) of seventy elders who will serve as an opposing force. These will be "of the elders of Israel whom you know to be the elders of the nation and its officers" – the best and most upright of the nation, representing a consolidation and strengthening of positive public leadership for the nation and a counterweight to the influence of the 'multitude.' This is the reason why Hashem's response opens with the guiding word, "asefah li" – gather to Me seventy men...

Added to these two words which are built on the same root – asafsuf-asefah – there is another "guiding pair of opposites" in our story. This combination is "basar" (flesh) and "ruah" (spirit) – a pair often juxtaposed in the Torah. It is the "spirit" that gives life to the flesh and without which it has no value (see, for example, Bereishit 6:17, Iyov 12:10). Here the "basar" refers to meat, meant for consumption.

The word "basar" is repeated three times in the first half of the story: once in unit a. (4) "Who will give us MEAT;" and twice in unit b., in Moshe's complaint (13) "From where do I have MEAT... that they cry to me saying, Give us MEAT that we may eat."

Corresponding to the desire to eat meat, which originates in the multitude, the spirit must be strengthened as an opposing force, by gathering the seventy elders:

(17) "And I shall come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the spirit that is upon you and I will put it upon them...."

Hashem is hinting to Moshe here that first the nation must be dealt with in a constructive way. The formal point of departure is indeed Moshe's personal complaint, but in Hashem's response this becomes a platform for the elevation of the nation's spirit through the consolidation of a broad leadership of seventy elders, who will acquire some of Moshe's spirit.

Moshe feels that he cannot deal with the nation that is so distant from him and bridge the abyss that exists between them. Hashem's response is that he indeed needs a bridge between himself and the nation. These seventy elders are on one hand authentic representatives of the nation, among "the elders of the nation and its officers," but on the other hand some of Moshe's spirit will rest upon them, and so they will be able to draw the nation after Moshe's spirit instead of them being drawn after the multitude in their midst.

## g. Eldad and Meidad

Moshe gathers seventy men of the elders of Israel around the Ohel, as he was commanded. Now is the moment for Divine action. That which was promised, (17) "And I shall take of the spirit that is upon you and I shall place it upon them," is fulfilled abundantly, as expressed in the many repetitions of the word "ruah" (spirit) and in the facts described. The spirit of Moshe rested not only upon the seventy elders gathered around the Ohel, but even to two individuals in the camp, of whom we are told, (26) "And the spirit rested upon them... and they prophesied in the camp."

Many commentators ask how this scene, the story of Eldad and Meidad in pesukim 26-29, is related to the general narrative and what it comes to teach us. An answer is not difficult to find, if we follow the reasoning of our analysis thus far: this scene puts Moshe to the test.

The fact that the messenger runs to Moshe to tell him about the prophesying of Eldad and Meidad in the camp, and Yehoshua's response upon hearing the report – "My master, Moshe, stop them!" – show how they perceived the event - prophecy that was not under Moshe's auspices (unlike that of the seventy elders) was a challenge to his leadership.

If Moshe had perceived Hashem's command that he gather seventy elders as merely technical assistance to his leadership, as nothing but a formal response to his complaint that he could not bear the burden of the nation alone, perhaps he too would have shared the perception of the messenger and of Yehoshua. The prophesying of Eldad and Meidad was not a form of assistance to Moshe's leadership, but rather presented a threat to it.

But Moshe's response reveals a different understanding of the Divine intention: Hashem meant to provide not technical assistance but rather a strengthening of the spirit of the NATION, a creation of a group of spiritual people who would prophecy and thereby influence the spirit of the nation against the influence of the multitude

lusting for meat. Therefore he answers Yehoshua, (29) "Are you zealous for me? If only all of Hashem's nation were prophets, that Hashem would give His spirit upon them."

The word "spirit" is repeated four times in this unit. Its first three appearances it refers to Moshe, but the fourth time, in pasuk 29, Moshe is speaking of HASHEM'S spirit being given to all of the nation. There is a complete release here from the perception that the resting of Moshe's spirit on the gathering of the elders is meant to ease Moshe's burden of bearing the nation.

This unit concludes with the root "a-s-f," the same way that it commenced: (30) And Moshe was gathered to the camp, he and the elders of Israel."

What does this pasuk come to add? The same message. It teaches us that the entire significance of the resting of the spirit upon the elders is not so that they will serve as an advisory and assistant body to Moshe. If this had been the case, they could have remained next to the Ohel. The whole point is that they return to the camp together with Moshe, in order to influence, to educate and to serve as a counterweight to the "multitude in their midst."

#### h. Epilogue

What is the lesson of our story? It seems that it is meant to teach us how a leader should behave in the face of a wild following without vision that rejects his values and desires meat. In response to Moshe's despair and helplessness Hashem proposes an alternative that contains no innovation, but is nevertheless the best solution: an attempt must be made to make the "spirit" prevail over the "flesh;" an "asefah" must be established to counteract the "asafsuf."

(Translated by Kaeren Fish.)

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