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**Datan and Aviram**

**By Rav Elchanan Samet**

a. "I am for peace, but when I speak - they are for war"

(12) "And Moshe sent [messengers] to call for Datan and Aviram, sons of Eliav..."

Why does Moshe send messengers to call for them? Rashi explains (and similarly Ramban):

"From here we learn that one should not prolong a dispute; Moshe pursued them in order to try and appease them with words of peace."

But this was not how Datan and Aviram perceived Moshe's attempts. Rashbam interprets their reaction to Moshe's invitation as follows:

"And they said, We shall not come up' - to you, for judgment. The term 'coming up' (aliya) is customarily used to denote going before judges."

They believe that Moshe has sent for them in order to stand before him in judgment as rebels. Indeed, Rashbam's interpretation of their words, "We shall not come up" is borne out by the continuation of their speech in verse 13: "...for will you then lord over us?" In Moshe's invitation, they perceive his "lording" over them, since they understand this as a summons to court, where he intends to judge them.

Rashbam is not disagreeing with Rashi here, for Rashi is explaining Moshe's motivation for calling upon them, while Rashbam is explaining the way in which Datan and Aviram perceived this invitation. They judge Moshe by their own standards, and therefore it never enters their minds that Moshe wishes to appease them.

Now we must ask: what was Moshe's real intention in inviting them? Was it meant to appease them with words of peace, or was it in order to judge them as rebels (which would have been an entirely legitimate course of action, considering the circumstances)? This is a strange debate over Moshe's intentions: Rashi and Ramban vs. Datan and Aviram.

How do Rashi and Ramban arrive at their interpretation? They deduce it from what is written in the Torah, not from their own imagination. Moshe's intention in sending for Datan and Aviram is discernible both in what the Torah describes prior to that mission and from what it tells us thereafter. The mission is preceded by Moshe's attempt at negotiating with Korach and his cohorts. From what he says in verses 9-10, we recognize his desire to establish talks with them and to cause them to back down from their position, using peaceful words: "He urged Korach to retract his claims, and spoke to him with soft words"

(Tanchuma 6). But Moshe received no response: "With all these words Moshe [tried to] appease Korach, but nowhere do we find any response. Since Korach was clever in his wickedness, he said... It is better that I have nothing to do with him" (Tanchuma, ibid.). Having had no success in his attempt to communicate with this group, Moshe sends for Datan and Aviram in order to try and talk with them: "When Moshe saw that he was getting nowhere [with Korach], he left him alone, 'and Moshe sent to call for Datan and Aviram'" (ibid.).

Ramban deduces Moshe's intention from the connection between his two attempts:

"Moshe SPOKE TO KORACH and to all his company, and ... spoke to Korach first, for he was the leader among them.

Similarly, the company of Datan and Aviram were rebelling against God, and therefore HE NOW HURRIED (in verse 12, by sending emissaries to call them) TO SPEAK TO THEM TOO."

But Datan and Aviram, as we have explained, mistook Moshe's good intentions, for they judged him by their own standards. They therefore accused Moshe - who was inviting them for the purposes of peace and appeasement - of lording over them. Now we can understand Moshe's reaction to this accusation: (15) "And Moshe became very angry." Why was he so angry? Midrash Tanchuma (6) explains (quoted here in abbreviated form):

"They, too, remained steadfastly wicked and did not deign to respond to him; they said, 'We shall not come up.' 'And Moshe became very angry' - he was greatly troubled. To what may this be compared? To a person who is talking with his friend and they are arguing: if his friend answers him, he has some satisfaction; if he does not answer him, he is greatly troubled."

It was this (second) refusal to communicate with him that so troubled Moshe. But from what Moshe says thereafter we find that there was also another reason for his anger:

"And he said to God: Do not pay attention to their offering! I have not taken even a single donkey from them, nor have I caused harm to any of them!"

What angers Moshe is the accusation that he is lording over them - an accusation that is exactly the opposite of what he is trying to do. Moshe never lorded over the nation, and to attribute such intentions to Moshe NOW, in this midst of his attempts to appease those rebelling against him, is an inexcusable perversion of his character and his actions. This is what so angers him.

Thus, the interpretation of Rashi and Ramban arises from the verses and the context. The dispute concerning Moshe's true intentions in calling upon Datan and Aviram is not between

Rashi and Ramban, on the one hand, and Datan and Aviram, on the other. Rather, it is between Moshe himself - who explains his intention both in his words to Korach and in his complaint to God - and Datan and Aviram, who interpret his invitation as the opposite of his real intention. "I am for peace, but when I speak, they are for war" (Tehillim 120:7).

b. "Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey..."

With these words Datan and Aviram complain that Moshe led them out of Egypt - "the good land" - to the wilderness, where they have been sentenced to die. In her essay "Datan and Aviram," Nechama Leibowitz z"l notes the surprising turn in these words:

"Their chutzpa reaches a climax in their use of the title of honor, reserved for the promised land - 'a land flowing with milk and honey.' When was this description first used in relation to the land of Canaan? It was at a most auspicious moment: these are God's words to Moshe in His first revelation at the burning bush, when He first introduces the imminent redemption... (3:8): 'And I shall go down to save them from the hand of Egypt, and to bring them up from that land to a good and spacious land, to A LAND FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY....' This description of the destined land... is used here by Datan and Aviram for a land of abomination, the house of slavery, the iron furnace - Egypt.

... Bnei Yisrael already praised Egypt as a 'fleshpot' immediately after leaving there, and longed for the place where they ate 'fish freely' even before that. But now we have something new, something that we have not yet seen. We are presented here with a total reversal, a reversal of the order of values, with everything upside down. What was slavery is now labeled as freedom; the land of impurity is awarded the title reserved exclusively for the Holy Land."

The expression, "flowing with milk and honey," appears twenty times in the Torah: in nineteen of them it describes Eretz Yisrael, and only in one verse - the one we are discussing - does this expression describe Egypt. Why is this praise reserved specifically for Canaan? It would appear to have no connection to the land's sanctity, nor even to its being the land of freedom, but rather expresses the land's natural qualities: it is a land whose produce is plentiful, tasty and freely available. But Egypt, too, has natural resources. Why, then, should Egypt not likewise be described by its admirers - Datan and Aviram - as a land offering bountiful, delicious food?

In Devarim 11:8-12 the Torah sings the praise of the promised land (see my shiur on Parashat Ekev in 5760). Seven times in this section we find the leading word "land," but the fourth time that the word appears - the central appearance - it is used in relation to Egypt:

(Devarim 11:10) "The land to which you are coming to inherit it, IT IS NOT LIKE THE LAND OF EGYPT, from which you came out, where you would sow your seeds and water it with your foot, like a vegetable garden."

The praise of Eretz Yisrael is contrasted in this section to the false goodness of Egypt. It is for this reason that the central appearance of the word "land" refers to Egypt - "NOT like the land of Egypt," while the praise of Eretz Yisrael is arranged around this verse in three pairs of appearances of the word "land." Each of these three pairs is connected by some linguistic or thematic connection.

The second pair presents a geographical-climatic and economic difference between the two lands:

(9) "A LAND flowing with milk and honey..."

(10) it is NOT LIKE THE LAND of Egypt... where you would sow your seeds and water it with your foot like a vegetable garden...

(11) A LAND of mountains and valleys; you will drink water from the rain of the heavens."

What is the "land of milk and honey"? The "honey" here is honey from bee-hives, which is like milk in that it is produced by an animal. Honey is the result of blossoming fields, while milk is the result of rich pastures. This description of the land therefore indicates that its natural goodness is of such a standard that even in the absence of organized agricultural activity, it produces bountiful honey and milk for its inhabitants.

Eretz Yisrael is a land "flowing with milk and honey" precisely because it is a "land of mountains and valleys" that are nourished from THE RAIN OF THE HEAVENS, as explained in the parallel verse of this pair. The arid Egypt, nourished only by the water of the Nile, may be a land of intensive and highly developed agriculture - "and you water it with your foot, like a vegetable garden" - but it is not naturally a land "flowing with milk and honey."

Thus, Datan and Aviram spoke falsely in awarding to Egypt the title reserved for Eretz Yisrael - A TITLE MEANT TO DISTINGUISH IT FROM EGYPT AND TO HIGHLIGHT THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THEM. By doing so, they apparently intended to belittle and heap scorn on the promised land.

Nechama Leibowitz is therefore correct in connecting the praise of Eretz Yisrael as a "land flowing with milk and honey" to the fact that it is the land of freedom and the holy land - "a land that God your God cares for; the eyes of God your God are always upon it, from the beginning of the year until the end of the year" (Devarim 11:12).

c. "Will you then put out the eyes of those people?"

What is the meaning of this rhetorical question, with which Datan and Aviram (almost) conclude their slanderous speech? The following is a brief review of what some of the early commentators have to say.

1. Onkelos, R. Sa'adia Gaon, Rashi:

Onkelos translates: "Will you send [someone] to blind the eyes of these men?" The only significant innovation here is the addition of the word "send" (tishlach), which does not exist in the text. In Onkelos's view, Datan and Aviram seem to fear punishment by Moshe.

R. Sa'adia Gaon and Rashi appear to adopt this interpretation:

Rasag: "Even if you threaten to blind those people - we will not come to you."

Rashi: "Even if you SEND to put out our eyes, we shall not come up to you; 'we shall not come up.'

'Those people' - like a person who attributes his curse to someone else."

Onkelos retains the interrogative nature of the sentence, while Rasag and Rashi turn it into a conditional one: "Even if you threaten...", "Even if you send..." - a condition whose result is expressed in the words, "We shall not come up."

What is common to all three of these interpretations is the assumption that Datan and Aviram fear that Moshe will punish them for their failure to present themselves before him by putting out their eyes. It is difficult, then, to understand why Onkelos formulates their fear as a question. But if we adopt the interpretation of Rashi and Rasag, who interpret the sentence as conditional, then why does the sentence begin with the interrogative "heh" ("ha-einei ha-anashim ha-hem...")?

Furthermore, we may ask a more fundamental question: since when is putting out eyes a punishment for people who refuse to present themselves when summonsed by a leader or king for judgment? Where did Datan and Aviram get the idea that this would be their punishment?

## 2. Rashbam, Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni, Maharam

This group of commentators preserves the interrogative nature of the sentence (as a rhetorical question) and also connects it to the previous words of Datan and Aviram. However, they ignore the literal meaning of the words and understand "putting out eyes" as a metaphor for not seeing and not discerning. Let us look, for example, at the Ibn Ezra:

"The meaning is: 'Do you wish to put out the eyes of those people?' - hinting at [all] those who left Egypt. As if to say, 'Do you wish to put out their eyes, that they should not see? For what you have done to us is visible.' It is a metaphorical way of saying, 'So-and-so's eyes are closed; he does not see' - THEREFORE we shall not come up.'

And some explain: 'Do you wish to darken the eyes, that they may not see?' As if to say - are you perpetrating some deceit on us?'"

The "darkening of eyes" or putting them out is attributed to Moshe, for - according to their claim - Moshe hopes that no one sees his actions, and he is trying to blur their significance. However, Datan and Aviram say, Moshe will not succeed: his actions are clearly visible, and the generation that left Egypt is not easily fooled.

According to these commentators, Datan and Aviram are making use of a common metaphor. Since they mean not a literal "putting out eyes" but rather an attempt to hide one's actions, by the words "those people" Datan and Aviram do not refer to themselves, "like a person who attributes his curse to someone else," for there is no "curse" here. Therefore Ibn Ezra understands "those people" as "hinting at those who left Egypt" - the entire generation. Datan and Aviram are attempting to

broaden their claim and to speak on behalf of all those who left Egypt.

Rashbam follows a similar direction in interpreting "those people" as "those people who are rebelling against you" - i.e., not only we, but all our partners in the present revolt, both active and passive. Chizkuni and Maharam offer similar interpretations.

We therefore have two different exegetical perceptions of the phrase, "Will you then put out the eyes of those people," and the principal difference between them boils down to a question of whether the "putting out of the eyes" should be understood literally or metaphorically. How are we to decide this question? It is not a simple matter, for if it is a metaphor, then the proof for this arises not from the words themselves but rather from their extra-linguistic context.

In instances such as these, some familiarity with the "living language" spoken at the time may be of assistance. The problem is that our only knowledge of biblical language is from the Torah itself, since we are not familiar with the idioms and metaphors that were common to speakers of the Hebrew language (except for those noted explicitly in the text). For this reason we may mistakenly interpret biblical metaphors in a literal sense, while any reader in biblical times would immediately have recognized them as metaphors. But the opposite may also happen: we may mistakenly interpret as a metaphor a sentence whose literal meaning seems unlikely to us for some reason - and thereby misunderstand the text.

The prevalent trend among later commentators - and among modern readers - seems to lean towards interpreting this sentence as a metaphor (in a manner similar to that of Rashbam or Ibn Ezra). But what is the basis for this trend? It is mainly the difficulty presented by a literal interpretation: in our context, putting out someone's eyes as a punishment seems strange.

But let us ask: does "putting out eyes" appear anywhere else in the Torah? If so, is it used as a metaphor? Blindness is admittedly used often in Tanakh as a metaphor for not recognizing reality or not seeing the truth. However, "putting out eyes" is not so: it appears only three more times in Tanakh:

(Shoftim 16:21) "And the Pelishtim seized him (Shimshon) and put out his eyes... and he became a miller in the prisoners' house."

(Shemuel I 11:2) "... That I may put out your right eyes (the men of Yavesh Gil'ad), making you a disgrace for of Israel."

(Mishlei 30:17) "An eye that mocks at his father and scorns to obey his mother - the ravens of the valley shall put it out..."

In each of these three verses, putting out of the eyes is an expression used in the literal sense, and it is a punishment or a source of disgrace. Why, then, should the mention of putting out eyes in our verse necessarily be meant as a metaphor for deception, for hiding one's actions? If this were the case, a gentler metaphor - "blinding" - would seem more appropriate.

If what we have said is true, and "putting out the eyes" is meant here literally, then we return to our question: what is the real-life background to these words of Datan and Aviram? We shall present here two answers, which are closely related. The first confirms the interpretation of Rasag and Rashi, that Datan and Aviram feared that their refusal to appear before Moshe for

judgment would entail the punishment of having their eyes put out. Prof. Moshe Weinfeld (Olam Ha-Tanakh, Bamidbar, p. 100) writes as follows:

"Putting out eyes was a common punishment for rebellion in the ancient east (and especially in the areas of the Hittites - cf. Melakhim II 25:7). Indeed, one Hittite document contains a threat of putting out eyes for failure to appear before the ruler: 'When you receive the letter, present yourself immediately; if not - your eyes will be put out.'"

We may add to this that we need not conclude that Datan and Aviram were really afraid that Moshe would act in accordance with this ancient eastern custom and punish them by putting out their eyes. No such norm existed in Israel, either in Moshe's time or in later generations. Moreover, had they really feared this, they would have agreed quickly to present themselves as ordered. But in their words they are declaring, quite disrespectfully, that they have no fear of Moshe and do not accept his authority to treat them as a ruler whose subjects are rebelling against him. For this reason they formulate their reply as a rhetorical question: "Would you dare punish us for our rebellion against you, as other rulers would in such circumstances?"

Another literal interpretation of this phrase is based on a book called "Kadmoniut He-Halakhah" by Shemuel Rubinstein (Kovno, 5686; see my shiur on Parashat Mishpatim for the full quote):

"The situation of a slave in ancient times was truly awful. He was like an object owned by his master, who was free to do whatever he wanted... The master could beat his slave mercilessly... he could permanently maim his limbs without fear of any punishment. For any purpose desired by the master, the slave could be blinded... And there were several other such reasons for which slaves would be blinded, TO THE POINT WHERE PUTTING OUT EYES BECAME A SYMBOL OF SLAVERY. Likewise, prisoners taken in war were similarly blinded as a sign of slavery, and this was done particularly to kings and officers of the defeated army, as a sign of revenge and enslavement. For the same reason Shimshon was blinded by the Pelishtim (Shoftim 16:21), and this is apparently also the meaning of the words of Nahash Ha-Amoni to the men of Yavesh Gil'ad: 'By this condition I will make a covenant with you: if you all put out your right eye' (Shemuel I 11:2), as if to say, 'You will be slaves and prisoners of war to me.' And for the same reason King Tzidkiyahu was blinded by Nevukhadnetzar (Melakhim II 28:7), AND THIS IS ALSO APPARENTLY THE MEANING OF THE WORDS OF DATAN AND AVIRAM TO MOSHE: 'WILL YOU PUT OUT THE EYES OF THOSE MEN?', AS IF TO SAY, 'ARE WE CONSIDERED IN YOUR EYES AS SLAVES OR PRISONERS OF WAR, THAT YOU WILL EXERT YOUR POWER OVER US and to do us whatever you wish, to drag us wherever you decide?'"

According to this interpretation, again, we do not conclude that Datan and Aviram truly feared that Moshe would put out their eyes and make them into his permanently-maimed slaves. Rather, it is once again an expression of defiance: "Do you then

consider us your servants, to the point where you can treat us as a master treats his slaves?"

We chosen between the exegetical possibilities available to us both by negating the probability of the text describing a metaphor, and by resolving the difficulty underlying the literal interpretation. Are we able to prove the literal interpretation presented here (both versions, since there is no significant difference between them) based on the style of the text?

Like every speech recorded in the Torah, that of Datan and Aviram is a literary gem, comprising sophisticated and well-polished rhetoric. We must therefore pay close attention to the composition of this speech. What immediately draws our attention is its rhetorical framework: the declaration, "We shall not come up!" with which it begins and ends. Rashbam comments on this as follows:

"This is a general statement, then the details, and then a restatement of general policy. First they say, 'We shall not come up', then they explain why not, and then repeat the conclusion - therefore, 'We shall not come up.'"

The body of the speech is built of two halves with a clear parallel between them. In the first half they accuse Moshe for the evil he has done to them in the past, while in the second half they accuse him of the good that he promised them and then failed to fulfill. The good that was not realized is the opposite of the evil that he has perpetrated. Each half concludes with a sharp rhetorical question representing the conclusion of the preceding claim. Let us compare:

First Half: THE EVIL PERPETRATED

(13) "Is it not enough that you have brought us up FROM A LAND FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY to have us die in the wilderness;

will you then lord over us?"

Second half: THE GOOD NOT FULFILLED

(14) "Nor have you brought us to A LAND FLOWING WITH MILK AND HONEY, nor given us an inheritance of fields and vineyards;

will you then put out the eyes of those people?!"

The first parallel is obvious: Moshe has brought them OUT of a land flowing with milk and honey, but has not brought them TO a land flowing with milk and honey, as promised.

The second parallel is equally clear: Moshe has taken them out to the desert to die there, and the desert is "this evil place, not a place of sowing, of figs and grapes and pomegranates" (20:5) - i.e., there is no inheritance of fields and vineyards, which represent the source of man's sustenance. And so, "We came out into the desert, but the promised opposite - an inheritance of fields and vineyards - has not been given to us."

What is the conclusion from all of this? Both what has been done until now, and that which has not been done but which was promised, prove that Moshe's leadership is a failure, and that he

has no right to rule over Israel. Hence the two defiant rhetorical questions, which respectively conclude each half by negating Moshe's leadership: "Will you then rule over us?," "Will you then put out the eyes of those people?" - you are not a prince over us, and we are not your servants!

Only by retaining the literal interpretation of the phrase, "Will you put out the eyes of those people," is the symmetry between the two halves of the speech preserved. Each half leads in its own way to the same conclusion - that Moshe has lost his right to rule and to issue commands.

The interpretation that sees these words in a metaphorical light damages the parallel between the two halves. These words understood in their metaphorical sense do not represent the conclusion to the preceding words; rather, they are a continuation and amplification. According to the metaphorical understanding, they do not express a direct and outspoken negation of Moshe's leadership.

What we have here is a rare example of how syntactical clues, historical references and use of literary analysis come together to lead us to an almost unequivocal choice between two interpretations: that of Rasag and Rashi turns out to be the one better suited to the literal text.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

