

The comparable complaint of the first generation is recorded in Parashat Baha'alotekha.

The Emergence of the Second Generation

By Rav Yair Kahn

t

The Israelites arrived, the entire congregation, at the wilderness of Zin in the first month [of the fortieth year] ... (Bemidbar 20:1)

Rashi: "The entire congregation" means the congregation that was complete, for [the generation of the exodus] had died in the desert, and these had remained alive.

Here we are finally introduced to the second generation, who will succeed where their predecessors had failed. In a previous shiur, we noted the midrash which defines Sefer Bemidbar as the book that distinguishes between light and dark, i.e. between the first generation, who failed in their mission, and the second generation, who succeeded. Therefore, we would expect the difference between these two generations to be as clear as night and day.

However, even a glance at our parasha leads to the troubling conclusion that nothing seems to have changed. The same mistakes made by the first generation seem to be repeated by their successors. When we read the passages where Benei Yisrael complain about food and water, we are struck with the strange sensation of *deja-vu*. The recurrent theme of the first generation "why did you take us out of Egypt" is repeated by their children (Bemidbar 20:5 and 21:5). Are we to conclude from this that there really is no significant difference between the two generations? Is the only difference rooted in one isolated incident that wasn't repeated by the second generation? In order to resolve this issue, we must take a closer and more critical look at those events which appear to be mere repetitions.

Let us first examine the complaint regarding the "manna."

They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." (Bemidbar 21:4-5)

The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then the Israelites wept and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" (Bemidbar 11:4-6)

In their first complaint about the manna, Benei Yisrael reminisce about the wonderful menu they had enjoyed while subject to Egyptian bondage. This is certainly a strange and ungrateful reaction, highlighted by the striking term "chinam" - for free. Even if we were to accept that the Egyptian slavemasters treated their Hebrew slaves to culinary delicacies, we can hardly be impressed by their generosity. Benei Yisrael paid dearly for their meals with blood, sweat and tears. In contrast, how much did God charge for the manna that fell daily from the heavens?

Our sages, of course, noted the absurdity of this argument. Rashi quotes a Sifrei (Beha'alotekha, 29) which offers an insightful interpretation.

"We remember the fish" - Did they indeed receive fish for free? Does it not say, "Go and work, and straw will not be given to you" - if they would not give them even straw, would they give them fish? What, then, do they mean by "free?" [They mean } free from mitzvot.

According to this explanation, Benei Yisrael's complaint revolved around the requirement to abide by the divine commandments imposed upon them. They reminisced about the unfettered life they led in Egypt, before being bound by the divine imperative. The food they received in Egypt was not dependent upon halakhic behavior. Manna, in contrast, demanded restraint and acceptance of the halakhic norm. Only a specific amount could be taken, and only on certain days. All that was taken had to be finished within the time allotted by the law.

Let us try to uncover what lies at the root of this complaint. In Beha'alotekha, Benei Yisrael have only recently been freed from bondage. However, the transition from slavery to freedom is complex and requires more than nullifying the possession of the slave-owner. After all, the distinction between a free person and a slave is not merely an economic one, but an existential one as well. A free man shoulders responsibility, while a slave is totally dependent upon others. His life functions are controlled by his master. He makes no choices for himself, and looks upon others to support him. He is not tormented by the consequences of his decisions, because he does not decide. Although in a state of

bondage, he is free from the worries that are inherent to the responsibilities of independence.

Our Sages had profound insight into the depths of human character and boldly proclaimed, "Avda be-hefkeira nicha lei" - a slave, from his limited perspective, prefers the lack of commitment which is typical of bondage (Gittin 13a). In fact, the Torah informs us that under certain circumstances a person is apt to choose a life of slavery over freedom.

But if the slave declares, "I love my master, and my wife and children: I do not wish to be free" ... (Shemot 21:5)

However, in such a case, the law requires that the ear of the slave be pierced. According to our Rabbis, this indicates that the decision to remain in slavery runs counter to the message, transmitted both in Egypt and at Sinai, of commitment to God.

"Then his master shall bring him ... to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever." (Shemot 21:6)

Rashi (quoting Kiddushin 22b):

Why is it more appropriate to pierce [the slave's] ear, rather than any other part of his body?

Rabbi Yochanan ben Zakkai said ... The ear which heard at Sinai, "For to Me are Benei Yisrael slaves," and then went and acquired an owner for himself - let it be pierced!

Rabbi Shimon expounded this verse beautifully: In what way are the door and the doorpost different than all other utensils in the house? God said: The door and the doorpost were witness in Egypt when I passed over [the houses of the Jews] and said, "For to Me are Benei Yisrael slaves; they are My slaves" - and not slaves to slaves; yet nevertheless this person went out and acquired a master for himself - let him be pierced before them!

In Judaism, religious commitment requires existential freedom. Although man must surrender his will unconditionally to God and accept absolutely the divine imperative, God is not interested in obedience that enslaves man existentially, but rather in commitment that uplifts man spiritually.

"And the writing was the writing of God, engraved (charut) upon the tablets" - Do not read "engraved" (charut) but rather "free" (cherut), for no one is truly free except he who engages in Torah study. (Avot 6:2)

Man must be able to freely accept upon himself the halakhic norm along with the yoke of Heaven. He must be capable of exercising "free will" - the ability to choose between good and evil, between life and death. He must be willing to shoulder responsibility for those decisions. Free man redeems himself by choosing life. In sharp contrast, the slave prefers to free himself of responsibility; however, he enslaves himself existentially. He accepts orders and acts accordingly so as not to be fettered by responsibility and tormented by decisions.

Although freed from Egyptian bondage, Benei Yisrael had not as of yet been weaned from a slave mentality. Despite receiving the Torah and boldly proclaiming, "Naaseh Ve-nishma" - "We shall do and we shall hear," the transition from bondage to freedom had not been completed. Therefore the people complained about the manna, which demanded the high price of spiritual responsibility and commitment. They reminisced about the uncommitted life of slavery typical of Egypt.

In the episode of the spies, we noted that the decree was due in part to the nation's immaturity. They lacked the security and composure necessary to conquer Canaan. The "telunot" (complaints) reflected a character flaw of a people unwilling to assume the responsibility required to realize Jewish destiny. According to our analysis of the complaint regarding the manna, this deficiency can already be detected at the beginning of the journey from Sinai.

Based on this, we can explain the opinion (Shabbat 116a) that the parasha of "Vayehi bi-nesoa" was introduced in order to separate the negative events which precede the parasha (i.e. childishly escaping Sinai), from those which are recounted afterwards (the complaints at the beginning of the journey beginning with manna). Following the parasha of "Vayehi bi-nesoa," we noted a steady decline which continues through Korach. There is no attempt at downplaying the impression of deterioration. Why then was it necessary to insert "vayehi bi-nesoa" to separate specifically between these two iniquities. It appears that the separation was introduced in order to distinguish between inherently incommensurate events. The sense of relief when leaving Sinai is unrelated to the process of decline which led up to the sin of the spies. It is merely a human reaction to the intensity and profound spiritual tension of "matan Torah." On the other hand, the decree condemning the first generation to death in the wilderness is inherently connected to the "telunot" at the onset of the journey. There is a link between the complaint regarding the manna and the sin of the spies. Both reflect a basic character flaw typical of a nation raised in bondage.

We are now ready to examine our parasha:

They set out from Mount Hor by way of the Sea of Reeds to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey and the people spoke against God and against Moses, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." (Bamidbar 21:4-6)

Once again it seems that the people, like their parents, complain about the exodus from Egypt. However, upon closer analysis, we notice something odd about this complaint. Why do the people speak of dying in the wilderness? Although they are tired of eating manna for forty years, monotony is not usually fatal. Furthermore, why do they continue to complain about water? We read in the previous chapter that the well was restored.

It seems clear that the people are not reminiscing about Egypt, but rather expressing their frustration at not immediately entering Eretz Yisrael. In order to avoid Edom, they are directed back towards Yam Suf, instead of turning towards Canaan. They are fed up with wilderness and its manna, and challenge Moshe: Were we taken out of Egypt in order to perish in the wilderness!? Wasn't the purpose of the exodus to inherit Eretz Yisrael, a land of wheat fields and running water? They are impatient, not hesitant; they are brimming with confidence, not incapacitated by fear.

We find a parallel distinction regarding the water complaint. The first generation argues that they should never have been taken out of Egypt and placed in a life-threatening situation in the wilderness.

"Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (Shemot 17:3)

The argument of the second generation runs in the opposite direction, towards Eretz Yisrael, not back to Egypt.

The people quarreled with Moshe, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord! Why have you brought the Lord's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!" (Bemidbar 20:3-5)

With the death of Miriam, the well is no longer available to the people. They find themselves in the wilderness with no source of water. They are dying of thirst and begin to complain about the wilderness. Surprisingly, they do not complain immediately about their thirst; first they point to the lack of wheat and figs, pomegranates and dates, and as an afterthought they also mention the lack of water. This bizarre argument leaves no room for doubt about their true intentions. We all know what figs, dates and pomegranates refer to, and it is obvious what was foremost on their minds. In spite of the lack of water, they complain about still being in this horrible wilderness. After forty years, it's time to enter Eretz Yisrael.

In conclusion, the generation taken out of bondage was not able to fully free itself from the mindset characteristic of slaves. After the exodus, they view God as a divine slavemaster who has to care for their every need. Unwilling to assume personal responsibility, they complain every time their needs are not

provided for. This trait expresses itself in the events which immediately follow the exodus, such as the complaint regarding the lack of water. However, even after receiving the Torah and commencing on the march towards Eretz Yisrael, they continue to complain, longing for the simple, uncomplicated and uncommitted life of Egypt. The climax is finally reached at the sin of the spies, when the fateful decree was issued. However, we can trace the roots of this decree to Masa and Meriva, when the nation redeemed from Egypt complained about the lack of water. This connection is expressed in a well known message from Tehillim recited every Friday evening.

Do not harden your hearts as in Meriva, as in the day of Masa in the wilderness: when your fathers tempted Me, proved Me, even though they saw My deeds. Forty years long did I loathe this generation and I said, It is a people that errs in their heart, and that do not know My ways; whereupon I swore in My wrath that they should not enter into My resting-place. (Tehillim 95:8-11)

A careful reading of parashat Chukat reveals the metamorphosis of Keneset Yisrael. They are confident - not insecure, impatient - not hesitant. They find themselves in similar situations as their parents, however, the subtleties that separate their respective responses distinguish night from day.

"And God distinguished between the light and the darkness" - This alludes to Sefer Bemidbar, which distinguishes between [the generation that] left Egypt and those who entered the Land. (Bereishit Rabba 3:5)