

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(Internet address: office@etzion.org.il)

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT SHELACH

**“But Do Not Rebel Against the Lord”
Rav Gad Eldad**

a. **“Forty years I loathed this generation”¹**

The period of *Am Yisrael's* wandering in the desert was characterized by many impressive manifestations of love between God and Israel, but it was also a period of ups and downs. From time to time, for a variety of different reasons, the people complained about their situation. The bitter formulation of their complaints conveys a strong impression of a lack of confidence in the journey and its purpose. For example, immediately after leaving Egypt, *Bnei Yisrael* voice their first complaint:

And they said to Moshe, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that **you have brought us to die in the desert?** Why have you dealt thus with us, to carry us out of Egypt? Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone, that we may serve Egypt’? For it would have been better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert.” (*Shemot* 14:11-12)

On some occasions, God’s response is mild and forgiving; on other occasions, there is harsh punishment. Either way, the journey continues, with the hope that the nation has learned its lesson. This hope is not always realized, but still God does not despair of His people.

Of the complaints that had a significant impact on the history of *Am Yisrael*, the sin of the spies stands out prominently. As a result of this sin, it was decreed that the entire generation would die in the desert instead of reaching the Promised Land. It is not altogether clear why the response on this occasion could not have been a more forgiving one. Why could God not have found some punishment that would leave room for recovery and moving on, along with recognition of the sin and atonement for it?

In order to answer this question, we must look at the complaints in a more general way.

b. **“For you have brought us out to this desert...”**

In the verses cited above, the people are angry with Moshe for his doomed initiative, as they see it, to bring them out of Egypt, since he thereby sealed their fate to die in the desert. Later on, we find to our surprise that this is not a one-time accusation, made in the heat of the moment, but rather a theme that repeats itself in other complaints:

¹ This *shiur* is based on my article, “*Arba'im Shana Akut Be-Dor – Le-Pesher Telunot Bnei Yisrael Ba-Midbar*,” *Megadim* 33 (Shevat 5761), pp. 43-52.

And the whole congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* murmured against Moshe and Aharon in the desert, and *Bnei Yisrael* said to them, “If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we ate our fill of bread, for **you have brought us out into this desert** to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” (*Shemot* 16:2-3)

The same claim is then repeated at Refidim:

And the people thirsted there for water, and the people murmured against Moshe and said, **“Why is it that you have brought us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?”** (*Shemot* 17:3)

Abravanel addresses this point in his lengthy commentary on the sin of the golden calf:

It should be pointed out further that the people who came out of Egypt, although they saw God’s awesome acts, were constantly influenced by the false beliefs of the Egyptians and their magic and their meaningless pagan practices, such that at the slightest provocation they would abandon their good faith and doubt their proper beliefs. For example, we see that in Egypt, when Moshe performed the signs before them, the Torah records that “the people believed” (*Shemot* 4:31) – and yet immediately afterwards they regress, telling Moshe and Aharon, “May the Lord look upon you and judge...” (*Shemot* 5:21). And although they believe [in God] at the time of the Exodus, immediately afterwards, “they rebelled at the sea, at the Yam Suf (*Tehillim* 106:7). Likewise, although after the splitting of the sea we read, “And they believed in the Lord and in Moshe, His servant” (*Shemot* 14:31), their doubts soon return: “Is the Lord among us, or not?” (*Shemot* 17:7). The episode of Korach proves that they were constantly entertaining doubts and questions as to the source of Moshe’s great power to perform all the acts that he did. **Therefore, in their complaints they always attribute the Exodus from Egypt to Moshe and Aharon, and not to God Himself.** (Abravanel, *Shemot* 32:1)

But the people’s behavior demands some explanation. How is it possible, after all they have seen and experienced first-hand, that they can imagine that it is Moshe who brought them out of Egypt? Is it not clear to them in the strongest and clearest terms?

Or has God ventured to go and take Him a nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, and by wonders, and by war, and by a mighty hand, and by an outstretched arm, and by great terrors, according to all that the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord, He is God; there is none else besides Him. (*Devarim* 4:34-35)

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(Internet address: office@etzion.org.il)

To answer this question, let us review the accounts of the journeys of *Bnei Yisrael* in *Sefer Bamidbar*.

c. **“At God’s word *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed, and at God’s word they encamped”**

An overview of *Sefer Bamidbar* leaves the reader puzzled as to why the Torah devotes entire chapters to descriptions of the nation’s journeys and how they were executed. Why is there a need to elaborate at such length, given that the information is all entirely technical in nature? Before proposing an answer, let us recall the Torah’s description of the order of the journey:

And it came to pass, on the twentieth day of the second month, in the second year, that the cloud was taken up from upon the *Mishkan* of Testimony. And *Bnei Yisrael* took up their journeys out of the wilderness of Sinai, and the cloud rested in the wilderness of Paran. And they first took their journey according to the commandment of the Lord by the hand of Moshe. In the first place went the standard of the camp of the children of Yehuda, according to their armies... And over the host of the tribe of the children of Yissakhar was... And over the host of the tribe of the children of Zevulun was... And the *Mishkan* was taken down, and the sons of Gershon and the sons of Merari set forward, bearing the *Mishkan*. And the standard of the camp of Reuven set forward according to their armies... And over the host of the tribe of the children of Shimon was... And over the host of the tribe of the children of Gad was... And the Kehati set forward, bearing the *Mishkan*, that they might set up the *Mishkan* by the time of their arrival. And the standard of the camp of the children of Efrayim set forward according to their armies... And over the host of the tribe of the children of Menashe was... And over the host of the tribe of the children of Binyamin was... And the standard of the camp of the children of Dan set forward, which was the rearward of all the camps throughout their hosts, and over his host was... And over the host of the tribe of the children of Asher was... And over the host of the tribe of the children of Naftali was... Thus were the journeyings of *Bnei Yisrael* according to their armies; then they set forward. (*Bamidbar* 10:11-28)

Nowhere in this picture is there any mention of Moshe and Aharon. Although they are sons of Kehat, it turns out that as leaders of the nation, they walked in front of the camp.²

² Moshe uses precisely this image to depict the role of the leader when he questions God about his successor: “And Moshe spoke to the Lord, saying, ‘Let the Lord, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them, and who may go in before them, and who may lead them out, and may bring them in, that the

Now, let us complete the picture by looking at the verses that follow soon afterwards, following Moshe’s appeal to Chovav (Yitro) to join them in their journey:

And they departed from the mountain of the Lord three days’ journey, and the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord went before them in the three days’ journey, to search out a resting place for them. And the cloud of the Lord was upon them by day, when they went out of the camp. And it came to pass, when the Ark set forward, that Moshe said, “Rise up, Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You.” And when it rested he said, “Return, Lord, to the ten thousand thousands of Israel.” (*Bamidbar* 10:33-36)

Now we can better imagine the scene: A great mass of humanity – six hundred thousand men alone, aside from all the women and children – was marching through the desert. At the head of this camp were Moshe, Aharon, and the Ark of God’s Covenant, with the cloud of God above them.³ Anyone can look upwards and see the cloud, but only those who are right in front can see who is leading the camp; the view of most of the people is obstructed by the many others walking ahead of them. Thus, although everyone might be able to see the cloud, lowered during periods of rest or raised during a journey, it is still impossible for them to know whether the Ark is leading Moshe and Aharon, with the cloud following behind, or whether it is Moshe and Aharon who are walking ahead, with the cloud trailing behind them.

Of course, the Torah states clearly:

And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, to lead them the way, and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them, light, that they might go by day and night... (*Shemot* 13:21)

But there is no indication as to whether this was known to and internalized by the people.

This helps us to understand why the Torah takes pains to set out the order of the camp in such detail, emphasizing along the way that everything was done in accordance with God’s word by the hand of Moshe, and not the other way around:

At the commandment of the Lord, *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed, and at the commandment of the Lord they encamped; as long as the cloud abode upon the *Mishkan* they remained

congregation of the Lord not be as sheep that have no shepherd” (*Bamidbar* 27:15-17).

³ The commentaries debate this picture of the camp. There is a textual contradiction concerning the location of the Ark during the journeying. According to the description in 10:21, it seems that the Ark is carried at the center of the camp, while in verse 33 the text states that it is carried ahead of the camp.

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(Internet address: office@etzion.org.il)

encamped. And when the cloud tarried long upon the *Mishkan* for many days, then *Bnei Yisrael* kept the charge of the Lord, and did not journey. At times it was the cloud was a few days upon the *Mishkan*; **according to the commandment of the Lord they remained encamped, and according to the commandment of the Lord they journeyed.** And at times it was that the cloud abode from evening until morning, and that he cloud was taken up in the morning, then they journeyed; whether it was by day or by night that the cloud was taken up, they journeyed. Or whether it was two days, or a month, or a year, that the cloud tarried upon the *Mishkan* remaining over it, *Bnei Yisrael* remained encamped, and did not journey, but when it was taken up, they journeyed. **At the commandment of the Lord they remained encamped, and at the commandment of the Lord they journeyed;** they kept the charge of the Lord, **at the commandment of the Lord by the hand of Moshe.** (*Bamidbar* 9:18-23)

The repetition of this fact would seem to indicate the need to reinforce it.

d. **“God did not lead them through the way of the land of the Pelishtim”**

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that **God led them not** through the way of the land of the Pelishtim... **for God said,** Lest the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt... **And the Lord spoke to Moshe,** saying, “Speak to *Bnei Yisrael*, that they turn and encamp before Pi Ha-Chirot, between Migdol and the sea, over against Ba'al Tzefon; before it you shall encamp by the sea...” And Egypt pursued after them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, and his horsemen, and his army, and overtook them encamping by the sea... And *Bnei Yisrael* lifted their eyes, and behold, Egypt marched after them, and they were very much afraid, and **Bnei Yisrael cried out to the Lord. And they said to Moshe,** “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that **you have brought us to die in the desert?** Why have you dealt thus with us, to carry us out of Egypt? Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, ‘Leave us alone, that we may serve Egypt?’ For it would have been better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert.” (*Shemot* 13:17–14:12)

This is a paradoxical picture: the Torah emphasizes that all the navigation conforms with God’s explicit command. However, when the nation realizes that their route is not leading them to freedom as promised, they cry out in prayer to God, Who brought them miraculous salvation in Egypt, asking that He save them once again – this time from the leadership of Moshe, who has brought them to die in the desert! And all this happens against the background that the text repeats once again:

And the Lord went before them by day in a

pillar of cloud, to lead them the way, and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light, that they might go by day and night; He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people. (*Shemot* 13:21-22)

The Torah, of course, describes the situation accurately and objectively – but this does not necessarily mean that the people saw it this way, and this was the root of their error.

e. **“For you have brought us out to this desert”**

This casts the complaints of *Bnei Yisrael* in a somewhat different light. Let us consider another example:

And the whole congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* murmured against Moshe and Aharon in the desert, and *Bnei Yisrael* said to them, **“If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt,** when we sat by the flesh pots, and when we ate our fill of bread, **for you have brought us out into this desert** to kill this whole assembly with hunger.” And the Lord said to Moshe, “Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you, and the people shall go out and gather a certain portion every day...” And Moshe and Aharon said to all of *Bnei Yisrael*, **“At evening you shall know that the Lord has brought you out from the land of Egypt... And what are we, that you murmur against us?”** (*Shemot* 16:2-7)

The people acknowledge that God’s hand was active in Egypt – and yet they accuse Moshe of having brought them out to die in the desert. It seems that the essence of the accusation here is not that Moshe brought them out of Egypt, but rather that he has mismanaged the historic process, leading them to a place where they would end up dying of hunger. Perhaps the people still attribute the original decision not to pass through the land of the Pelishtim to Moshe himself, and that is why they are bitter towards him for the seemingly superfluous and dangerous detour.

In his response, Moshe tries to convey the message that the entire process, down to the smallest details, is all God’s plan, while he is simply carrying out God’s command. Therefore, Moshe tells them, they are directing their complaints to the wrong address.

f. **Masa U-Meriva**

And all the congregation of *Bnei Yisrael* journeyed from the wilderness of Sin, by their stages, **according to the commandment of the Lord,** and pitched in Refidim, and there was no water for the people to drink. And the people strove with Moshe, and said, “Give us water that we may drink.” And Moshe said to them, “Why do you strive with me? **Why do you tempt the Lord?**” And the people thirsted there for water, and the people murmured against Moshe and said, **“Why is it that you have brought us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and**

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(Internet address: office@etzion.org.il)

our cattle with thirst?” And Moshe cried to the Lord, saying, “What shall I do to this people? They are almost ready to stone me.” And the Lord said to Moshe, “Pass before the people, and take with you of the leaders of Israel, and your staff, with which you smote the river, take in your hand, and go. Behold, I will stand before you there upon the rock in Chorev, and you shall smite the rock, and there shall come water out of it, that the people may drink.” And Moshe did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. And he called the name of the place Masa U-Meriva, because of the strife [*riv*] of *Bnei Yisrael*, and because **they tempted [*nasotam*] the Lord**, saying, “Is the Lord among us, or not?” (*Shemot* 17:1-7)

The text emphasizes that the arrival at Refidim was also at God’s command – but the people once again berate Moshe for bringing them out of Egypt on a route that will lead to their death in the desert.

On this occasion, both levels of leadership – that of Moshe and that of God – are addressed. Moshe includes in his response the proper address for their complaint – God Himself – although the people make no reference to Him. Afterwards, there is a dialogue between Moshe and God, without the knowledge of *Am Yisrael*. The text then summarizes the event as *Bnei Yisrael’s* strife with God, accusing them of “tempting” or “testing” God, even though the people make no such claim.

All of the above gives rise to a question: If *Bnei Yisrael* recognize God’s involvement and His greatness as reflected in the miracles in Egypt, why do they not turn to Him directly and ask for His deliverance, choosing instead to complain to Moshe?

It may be that it is specifically the recognition of God’s greatness that causes the people to “keep their distance.” At this stage, it may be difficult for them to internalize the fact that the Creator of the world involves Himself, on an ongoing basis, with the mundane details of the journey and the mortal needs of the people. For them, it is Moshe who is in charge, who bears overall responsibility, and who is therefore the address for their complaints.

From this perspective, it may be that they imagined that if Moshe had indeed led them to a dead end, he should turn to God to help him and save the people. This is his responsibility by virtue of his status and the role that God had entrusted to him.⁴

It is this mindset that Moshe must contend with, and he tries to explain to the people that “in the same place where you find the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, there you also find His humbleness” (*Megilla* 31a). Although God is Creator of the world, His choice of *Am Yisrael* means that He accompanies them

with attention to all the small details along the way. “And what are we, that you murmur against us?”

g. **“This is your God, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt”**

Let us now consider the sin of the golden calf from this perspective. Ramban states:

“Who will go before us” - ... This is the key to a proper understanding of the matter of the golden calf and the thinking behind it. Obviously, *Bnei Yisrael* did not think that Moshe was God, and that he had performed the signs and wonders with his own powers. What, then, did they mean by saying, “Now that Moshe has left us, let us make ourselves a god”? Furthermore, they say explicitly, “a god to go before us” – not a god to give them life in this world and in the World to Come. **Rather, what they wanted was another Moshe. They said: Moshe, who showed us the way from Egypt until here, for the journeys have been “by the word of God by Moshe’s hand” (*Bamidbar* 9:23), is lost to us. Let us make for ourselves a different Moshe who can show the way before us, according to God’s word, at his hand.** (Ramban, *Shemot* 32:1)

This explains the exchange between Moshe and God in the wake of the sin:

And Moshe besought the Lord his God, and said, “Lord, why does Your anger burn against Your people, **whom You have brought forth out of the land of Egypt** with great power and with a mighty hand?” (*Shemot* 32:11)

Whereas God later tells Moshe:

“Depart and go up from here – you and the people **whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt**, to the land of which I swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov, saying, ‘To your seed I will give it.’ And I will send an angel before you...” (*Shemot* 33:1-2)

Clearly, God is not suggesting that it was Moshe who brought *Am Yisrael* out of Egypt. The exchange here focuses on the question of who is responsible for what has happened to the people from Egypt until this point. God refers to the complaint of the people, referring to them as “the people whom you have brought up out of the land of Egypt,” as proof that they are not worthy of His direct leadership. He therefore informs Moshe that henceforth an angel will go before them.

h. **“Only do not rebel against the Lord”**

Now the sin of the spies is revealed for the cataclysmic crisis that it is. Here, there is no way of defending the people by suggesting that they did not understand how the navigation of the route was determined by God alone. The nation is well aware, and now, for the first time, directs its complaint against God directly:

⁴ If the people felt that all possibilities had been exhausted and that Moshe was incapable of dealing with the difficulty they were facing, it is possible that they might, in their despair, have turned to God – as indeed they did at the Yam Suf.

Yeshivat Har Etzion Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash
(Internet address: office@etzion.org.il)

And all of *Bnei Yisrael* murmured against Moshe and against Aharon, and the whole congregation said to them, "If only we had died in the land of Egypt! Or if only we had died in this wilderness! And **why is the Lord bringing us to this land**, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? Would it not be better for us to return to Egypt?" (*Bamidbar* 14:2-3)

Here we find not a misunderstanding, but a real crisis in the people's faith in God. This displays a lack of confidence so profound that even the spontaneous initiative of the *ma'apilim*, who realize the gravity of their sin and propose proceeding anyway to *Eretz Yisrael*, cannot repair the damage.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Visit our website: <http://www.vbm-torah.org>