

Parashat Beshalach

From Sea to Sinai – The Path of Faith

Who would think that after all the miracles of the Exodus, Bnei Yisrael would complain to God? Despite the Ten Plagues and the Crossing of the Reed Sea, this parasha ends with repeated grumbings by the Israelites. What is wrong with them?

We are talking about the latter half of the parasha. In this section, the Jewish people have crossed the Yam Suf and are making their way, stage by stage towards Har Sinai. The latter half of the parasha contains a series of stories. They are:

1. 15:22-26 Mara
2. Ch. 16 The Manna
3. 17: 1-7 Masa U-Meriva
4. 17:8-15 Amalek

In order to understand these stories, and the complaints of Bnei Yisrael, we are going to take a look at these episodes as a series. And rather than portraying these stories as "complaint" stories, we shall view them as a process of growing up, of transformation and learning. We shall chart the manner in which these stories connect as they inform us of the spiritual journey taken by the people as they travel from Egypt to Sinai.

Chavruta

1. For each of the 3 "complaint" stories:

- Were the people justified in complaining?
- Does God get angry? Why?

2. The story of Marah: 15:22-27.

- Read it in detail and ask yourselves some questions of your own.
- Divide this story up into sub-sections
- Is there any section of the story which would seem out of place?

15:25-27 "There he gave them a law and statute"

What is the role of the "law and statute" in this story?

- What does it entail?
- How does God's warning about his commandments fit into the context of this story. Why is it relevant to water?

15:25 :

a. See **Rashi** . What were they taught at Marah?

b. **Rashbam** . What does he mean by the phrase: "allilat nisayon"?

According to the Rashbam what did God have in mind as the objective of this event?

c. **SEPHORNO**. To what other ceremony is the Sephorno comparing this event? Do you agree with his assessment of this story?

3. If you have time, see the Gemara in Bava Kamma 62a which uses this story as a basis for the practise of weekly Keriyat HaTorah :

According to this Gemara

- what was the "water" that they were lacking on the third day?
- How is this "d'rash" relevant to the "p'shat" of the pesukim here?
- What was **meant** to happen on the third day out of Egypt? see Shemot 3:12,18, 5:3.

Shiur:

What strikes us immediately is the way in which each of these three stories deal with basic food requirements:

1. Marah - water
2. Manna - food.
3. Masa U-Meriva - water

In this chiasmic group, the nation lacks a basic foodstuff, food or water in each story, and this is then provided for them miraculously. So the first things we can emphasise are FOOD and MIRACLES.

In addition we have the notion of a TEST. Each episode contains the element of a test. At Marah:

"There he set for them a statute and a judgement AND THERE HE TESTED THEM." (15:25)

With the Manna:

"In order to TEST whether they will walk by my Torah or not." (16:5)

And at Masa U-Meriva:

"They tested God, saying 'Is God with us or not?'" (17:7)

So there is an element of a test here. This is a further unifying factor between the stories. Let us start to study them, one by one, in order to determine what is happening here.

MARAH

"Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on to the wilderness of Shur; they travelled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink water from Marah because it (they) were bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And

the people grumbled against Moses saying 'What shall we drink?' He cried to the Lord and the Lord showed him a tree . He threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There he set for them statute and judgment and there he put them to the test. He said 'If you listen well to the voice of the Lord your God, doing what is upright in his sight, giving ear to his commandments and keeping all his laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians for I the Lord am your healer.'" (Exodus 15:22-26)

A strange story. A thirsty nation, bitter waters, a "magic" tree, statutes and judgments, the diseases of Egypt; What is happening here?

This is the first time that the people "grumble". It would seem that they are absolutely justified in their complaint! They have been travelling for three days in the parched desert. We can be sure that any water supplies that they brought with them have been consumed. Could we expect them to be silent? Not even to put in a request?

Interestingly enough, we see no anger here, not on the part of Moses nor from God. It would appear that God accepts the request as legitimate and provides a solution to the water shortage.

But this doesn't really get to the bottom of the issue because this episode seems to have a second less obvious theme. I am referring to the strange inclusion of the teaching of a "statute and commandment" and the promises about listening to God and obeying his command. How does the water story on the one hand, and this emphasis on God's law and the Children of Israel's acceptance of it, become a single story?

A SET-UP

The RASHBAM (15:25) puts it in the following way:

"There he set for them statute and judgment and there he put them to the test : There at Marah, through the fabrication of a test - God made them thirst for water and then 'healed' the water for them - He began to demonstrate to them, that if they will keep the statutes and judgments which He will teach, He will provide their needs."

The Rashbam notes an important side of this event. It is all a "set-up" by God! He lead them on a route on which there would be no water, he guided them to the bitter "marah" waters and then he "healed" the waters making them fit for human consumption. Why is God doing this?

Let us explain the meaning of the "test." Some tests examine what you state you are in at present. A maths exam will test whether you know algebra. A blood test will analyse the cholesterol or iron in your blood. This type of test measures the current state of a person.

But there is another context in which we use the notion of a test. If a person undergoes a testing situation, a moment of unusual responsibility at work, a physically enduring experience, this experience is in fact a growth experience. The person emerges stronger, he has grown and learned from the experience. A soldier undergoing the "testing" experience of basic training emerges more professional, more resilient, and competent. In this test I emerge changed. The test does not examine the current state of being. The test challenges a person allowing them to grow, to change. One merges different than one enters.

It is this second classification of the term "test" which, I believe, the Rashbam is referring to here. This is a process of growth, of transformation. This is an educational opportunity. The Rashbam explains that God is teaching the Jewish people the most basic of lessons. That the national fortune of this people is tied up with their adherence to the word of God. This lesson will become a central motif, a fundamental theme of the Bible. God shows them how He can provide for their basic necessities. At the same time, God begins to talk about Torah and a new way of life. The verse tells us that they were taught "Statute and judgments". According to RASHI, it was here that God presented Israel with their first commandments.

It is a ploy. The people need water. God gives it to them. He demonstrates the simple fact that He is their provider. BUT at the same time, he begins to teach them His code of living. His condition for relationship is a lifestyle of Mitzvot.

WATER AND TORAH

A famous rabbinic saying states that "words of torah are compared to water" . It is interesting that this theme fits in very closely with this narrative. This event - the thirsting for water" - happens after three days in the wilderness: "...they travelled three days in the wilderness and found no water". According to the projected plan of Moses, what was meant to have happened on the third day in the wilderness? What was planned for the third day after their extraction from the clutches of Egypt? Moses himself has told us. It is in the master plan. Every time Moses goes to Pharaoh he tells him that

"We want to GO THREE DAYS into the wilderness to sacrifice to our God" (see 8:23 and other variations- 3:18, 5:3, 7:16, 10:11, 10:26)

The end of the three day journey was meant to herald a religious ceremony! And what religious ceremony could be more central than the giving of the Torah? The Midrash, by way of a parable tells us that the people were looking for "water," i.e.Torah, at the end of these three days. It gives this as the reason why the Torah is read publicly thrice weekly (Monday, Thursday and Shabbat), so that "the people should not go three days without words of Torah" (Tanchuma #19).

Other elements of the story are reminiscent of a Torah theme. The word “*vayoreihu*” - God showed him (the tree) - is an unusual form containing the root of the word “torah”. The imagery of the tree sweetening the water reminds us of the verse (referring to Torah) “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it.” (Proverbs 3:18). Spiritual sustenance is as essential to a person as the physical and this slave nation lacked both. God aims to provide food for the body and for the soul.

The Midrash has found an important parallel, for this parsha is about finding Torah as much as it is about finding water. After severing the ties with Egypt, God takes them through the wilderness, building up a relationship with them. His aim, through a series of events is to teach them the Torah is the source of life; it is synonymous with it.

MANNA

The next story too; the Manna, repeats this theme. The people get hungry. Note the date. It is “the fifteenth of the Second Month,” They have been travelling for thirty days. No wonder that their food is depleted. They have not had an opportunity to restock for a month. God provides them with daily bread - the manna - but at the same time begins to initiate them into the laws of the Sabbath. What is happening here? What is this interesting combination- Manna and the Sabbath? Here God is constructing an environment in which the nation receive their basic food needs, but at the same time, learn about the new tempo, the rhythm of their week – the Shabbat – which testifies to God’s control over man, over earth. Again, we see God drawing a parallel between physical sustenance and spiritual teaching.

The process which we see unfolding here is, in essence, the gradual process of preparing for the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. For the people to accept its terms, they have to understand a little of its content and essential ideas. It is this introduction: to Shabbat, to “statutes and judgments” which helps them to taste a sample of what is to come.

The Mechilta puts it in the following way:

“God did not bring the people to Israel on the direct route. Instead he took them through the desert. God said ‘ If I bring them to the Land of Israel now, everyone will immediately involve themselves with their field or vineyard and they will pay no attention to Torah! Instead, **I will take them through the wilderness. They will eat the manna and drink water from the miraculous well (that God provided by hitting the rock 17:5) and the Torah will become absorbed within their body.**”

SLAVE MENTALITY

Maybe we can suggest that this Midrash taps into an important psychological phenomenon - the psychology of the slave.

The Israelites are used to living as slaves. Slaves are provided with rations so that they can work. The Egyptians made sure that they had food. What do the Israelites remember? They remember only that they were cared for there and provided for. But when they find themselves hungry with no means of provision, they are immediately lost. Like a child without their mother, they simply cry. A simple need unfulfilled is a crisis for the slave. God uses this basic need to establish a dependency upon Him. The people should understand that God is their protector and provider. God will give them that security that they seek so desperately. God wants them to be fully aware that he is filling the vacuum created by their Exodus from Egypt.

THE ROCK AT MOUNT SINAI

This brings us to the third story. Moses hits the Rock to provide the people with food. Does this story bring the people nearer to Torah? God provides the people with water, but he teaches them no Torah here. So how does this fit the pattern?

“God said to Moshe: Pass before the people, take with you some of the Elders of Israel and the staff with which you struck the Nile river, and set out. I will be standing on the Rock at Horeb. Strike the Rock and the water will burst forth and the people will drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the Elders of Israel.” (17:5-6)

Where does Moshe strike the rock? From where does the water flow? From Mount Horeb, otherwise known as Mount Sinai! This episode does not connect them to a particular mitzva or law. Rather, it connects them to the SOURCE OF ALL LAW!

Imagine the Israelites, parched in the wilderness. There is no water. They protest to Moshe. He then takes his staff and the leaders and walks out of the camp. Some hours later, the people are overjoyed as they see the wadi adjacent to their encampment filled with flowing water. They drink their fill, feed their children and animals, they wash themselves and launder their clothes. They are elated.

But then imagine as they take the next leg of their trek - from Refidim to Horeb, to Sinai. They follow this life-giving wadi, to the water source itself! At the source of the spring, at the waters' origin, they receive the Torah, their source of spiritual sustenance. Once again the physical mirrors the spiritual. They work in tandem. God, by providing Israel’s physical needs, demonstrates they he is a worthy protector, a parent-figure, who cares, who hears the nations needs. He is a God of life. And it is precisely through the material things that God

creates a connection with the people. Only after that does he progress to the spiritual covenant of Sinai.

AMALEK

The parsha of Amalek ends this process. How so?

Rashi understands that God is frustrated by the Israelites' refusal to appreciate His protection and provisions in the desert. After all, in 17:7 they "test God by saying 'Is God in our midst or not?'" Are they really doubting God's presence.

Rashi uses a story to illustrate the attack of Amalek. A man was out walking with his son on his shoulders. "Father would you please get me this, and would you please get me that? The father willingly complied time after time. A while passed. They passed a man on the road, and the boy asked "have you seen my father?" When the father heard that, he took him down from his shoulders, and a dog came and bit him.

Amalek's attack is a wake-up-call, a punishment to an unappreciative nation. It is a lesson to a people who take their gifts for granted.

But there is a second way to understand Amalek. Look at the structure of the parsha. It is a chiasm.

A . WAR with EGYPT

----- B. WATER – Marah

----- C. FOOD – Manna

----- B2. WATER – Massa Umeriva

A2. WAR with Amalek

And what a difference this parsha draws between the two battles; Egypt and Amalek. In the first war, the people were paralysed, they could not fight! They cry to Moses:

"What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt... it is better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." (14:11-12)

And Moses responds:

Stand back and watch the salvation of God... God will fight for you; you stand silent!"

The people are passive, powerless, frozen in place. Ibn Ezra comments:

"How can a people of 600,000 people be so scared and not fight their attackers? ... The Egyptians were masters to the Israelites. This Exodus generation was accustomed from the youngest age to suffer under the yoke of Egyptian oppression.

Their spirit was broken. How could they stand up and fight their masters ... after all they were inexperienced in the art of war...."

That is the first war.

But in the war of AMALEK, the people DO fight. They fight and they win. They are active.

Interestingly, Moses stands on the hill with his staff in hand, and when his hands are raised, Israel is victorious. When they are lowered, Israel loses. IS Moses' staff the critical factor here? Is this yet another miracle of Moses' staff and God's power? This is what the Rabbis say in the Mishna:

"And it was that when Moshe held up his hands Israel prevailed and when he lowered his hands Amalek prevailed." (Shemot 17:11) But could the hands of Moses win a war or lose a war? Rather it comes to tell you that **whenever Israel looked upwards and committed their hearts to their father in heaven, they prevailed, and if not, they fell....**" (Mishna Rosh Hashanna ch.3)

It is not Moses' staff that wins the day, but Israel's faith. Now God is fighting for them, but unlike at the Red Sea, the people do not "stand back". They are not silent spectators. They are active partners. They have a new confidence, a new independent fighting spirit. They are transformed. And it has been the weeks between the war at the Sea to the war of Amalek that have changed them.

This parsha is about a transformation of a nation. At the Red Sea, the nation severed their dependence on Pharaoh. Now Bnei Yisrael has begun a new process. They start learning a whole new system of faith and reliance. They undergo an educational process in three stages. God initiates them into the realisation that Torah is their food and water. God orchestrates these events in order to prepare the people to accept the Torah. This is a process of getting ready to see God as provider and commander in order that we may accept Him as our God and his Law as a guiding force for all time.

Shabbat shalom