

Thinking Torah

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Devarim-Va'etchanan

"It was your fault!"

In Sefer Devarim we listen in as Moshe Rabbeinu addresses Am Yisrael for the final time. After forty years of leadership, and the trials and tribulations of the Exodus and the wilderness, what messages does Moshe wish to convey in his parting words? It would appear that Moshe is looking to the future. He is concerned that the enterprise to which he has dedicated his entire life will reach its fulfilment successfully. He wants Bnei Yisrael to enter the land of Israel and to flourish in their land. In order to achieve this aim, Moses looks back and reminds the nation of their failures, he criticises them for their shortcomings and he hopes that they will learn from their mistakes.

The Midrash tells us:

"The critique (of Israel) should have come from Bilaam, and the praise of Israel from Moses! But, had Bilaam criticised and rebuked Israel, the Israelites would have said: 'Well he is our opponent, obviously he finds fault.' And if Moses had blessed and praised them, the nations would have said: 'Well he loves them anyway!' Said the Holy One blessed be He: 'Let Moses who loves them engage in the rebuke of the people; let Bilaam who hates them utter the blessings so that the praise and critique of Israel be clear to all.'" (Devarim Rabba 1:4)

These lines of rebuke are not said in anger. This is a criticism of love!

Amongst the fault-finding and the warnings of Sefer Devarim, we find one rather puzzling accusation on Moshe's part. Many of the criticisms are accurate, but this one strikes us as peculiarly unfair. Let us explain. As we all know, God denies Moshe the possibility of entry into Eretz Yisrael. Despite Moses' earnest plea, as we read at the start of Parshat Va'etchanan, God bans him from access to the Promised Land, the land to which he has been journeying for a generation. This is familiar to us all. But what is strange in Sefer Devarim is that Moshe repeatedly casts the blame for this harsh personal punishment on the head of Bnei Yisrael! He accuses the nation of being the cause of his tragedy:

CHAVRUTA MEKOROT

1. Begin by studying the **pesukim** themselves.
 - First see the references for Moshe's accusation: Devarim 1:37, 3:26, 4:21
 - Contrast this with the many places in Tanach that give a very different reason for Moshe's restricted entry to Eretz Yisrael: See Bamidbar 20:12 (and the entire episode 20:1-12); 20:24; 27:14; Devarim 32:48-51.

2. Commentaries:

The best approach to the topic would be to study three different approaches by commentaries on Devarim 1:37. See:

- Ramban, Abarbanel and the Seforno.
(The Seforno is complicated and certainly not straightforward. Spend some time analysing his view.)

For each commentator, ask yourselves how the explanation fits in with the reasons given by the Torah in:

- i. Bamidbar
- ii. Devarim

and how do they resolve the difficulty between them.

3. Articles that deal with Moshe's sin in Parshat Chukat will be good background for this topic. See:

- Rav Leibtag's shiur
<http://www.tanach.org/bamidbar/chukat1.doc>
- Rabbi Nathaniel Helfgot's interesting article, which concludes in a similar direction to Rav Leibtag:
<http://www.lookstein.org/links/moses.htm>

THE SHIUR SECTION:

POSING THE PROBLEM

Let us present our problem in the following way. The Torah repeatedly informs us that Moses will die on the eastern bank of the Jordan, being denied entry into the Land of Israel,

"for you broke faith with Me among the people of Israel, at the waters of Merivath-Kadesh in the wilderness of Zin, by failing to uphold my sanctity among Bnei Yisrael." (Devarim 32:51)

So it is Moses' sin at Mei Meriva that prevents his entry to the Land.

But Moses thinks otherwise. He repeatedly blames the nation. He tells the nation that it was their fault. In what way are Bnei Yisrael to blame? What did the nation do wrong? Was it not Moses' sin? Does the Torah not state explicitly, multiple times, that this is Moses' sin?

And additionally, in 1:37 Moses inserts his accusation into the story of the Spies:

"When the Lord heard your complaint, he was angry. He vowed: Not one of these men, this evil generation, shall see the good land that I swore to your fathers – none except Calev ben Yephunneh; he shall see it ... BECAUSE OF YOU the Lord was incensed with me too and he said: You shall not enter it either. Joshua Bin Nun who assists you, he shall enter it..." (1:34-37)

Not only is Moshe passing the blame to Bnei Yisrael, but he would seem to be insinuating that his restriction of entering Eretz Yisrael originated with the episode of the meraglim, the spies. How could this be true? Other statements of the Torah clearly indicate that the episode at Mei Meriva was the cause of Moses' punishment. And so we are left with a second query regarding Moshe's words here in Devarim 1:37.

So, to summarise:

1. Is Moses' banned entry to Eretz Yisrael Moshe's fault or the people's fault?
2. Was it a punishment for Mei Meriva, or maybe for the meraglim?

Approach 1. The Ramban

"God was incensed with me because of you: As if to say, that sin which you transgressed, the Spies, restricted you from entering the good land, and you sinned on another occasion to the point at which you prevented me too from crossing over into the land. He (Moses) wished to record centrally all of those who were restricted from entering the land, the restriction being a function of their sins.

...The reason for the phrase "because of you," is because "the children of Israel argued with God ..." (Bamidbar 20:13) and it all happened because of your arguments! ... alternatively, this alludes that the anger directed at Moses and Aaron when they hit the rock twice before the nation and did not act as instructed by God, and the people witnessed this, as it states: 'that you did not sanctify Me IN THE MIDST OF BNEI YISRAEL.' (Devarim 32:51) The punishment was a function of the fact that this was public, before the nation, that God's presence was not sanctified in their audience."

So Moses' punishment is a result of Mei Meriva. It is just brought along with the sin of the spies in order to collate the different episodes that lead to the non-entry of people into the Promised Land. Is Moses blaming the nation? In a sort of circumstantial manner, he is. He tells them that he would never have got himself into such a serious situation were Bnei Yisrael more patient, more respectful and less rebellious. Alternatively, Moses blames them, for his action was only problematic to the degree that it was witnessed by the entire nation. A private slip-up is OK. On prime-time TV it is inexcusable. Similarly, Moses here states that it was the public audience that brought about his restriction from entering the Land.

Approach 2: The Abarbanel

"Now it is left for me to explain why Moshe Rabbainu wanted to insert his own punishment alongside that of the spies. ...The root of the answer is to identify the sin of Moses and Aharon, the sin that sentenced their death, preventing them from entering the Land. This is a very deep matter, who can find it(s) truth? Indeed, my own opinion is different to all those who preceded me.

... Moses and Aharon did not die due to the sin of Mei Meriva ... Aharon, the holy one of God, died due to the sin of the Golden Calf, and Moses, our master, died for the sin of the Spies. This is not to say that

Moses – God forbid – backed up the Spies' advise. But Aharon as you know, with no evil intent, created the Calf ... and even though his intent was to lead them calmly until Moses would arrive, we know the end of the story. Indeed, the people were punished severely for their sin, some died in the plague and others by the sword. They didn't enter the Land, according to God's decree, and Aharon caused all of this! It would only be appropriate justice that just as Aharon caused many people to die in the wilderness, similarly he should die there and not enter the Land. Admittedly he was not like the others who sinned willingly, and so he was not punished together with them, at that time.

... As for the sin of Moses our teacher, when the people requested Spies, they asked only regarding "the route by which we will invade and the cities we shall meet." (1:22) Indeed God also said simply: "Send men that they shall tour the Land of Canaan." (Bamidbar 13:2) But our master Moses added many dimensions to their mission, ordering them to investigate the nature of the people there, "strong or weak" (Bamidbar 13:18) and the nature of the land etc. ... and there is no doubt that all these questions were well intended to boost the nation's enthusiasm, but we all know how the story ended! The answers regarding the strength of the people and their fortified cities, and the land that consumes its inhabitants etc. deflated their confidence entirely. This all lead to the decree that the nation not enter the land..."

So in the view of the Abarbanel, it is Moses and Aharon's involvement in earlier episodes: the sin of the Golden Calf and the Spies, that seal their fate. If that is the case, then how does Mei Meriva fit in? The Abarbanel explains:

"When, in Parshat Chukat, the people complained regarding the lack of water, and they mentioned, in the course of their complaint, that Moshe and Aharon had caused the nation to be in this situation - the death in the desert and their restriction from entering the Land – "Why did you bring the community of God to the desert to die, us and our flocks" (Bamidbar 20:5) – then the Torah records how Moshe and Aharon went into the Tent of Meeting in a state of shame and embarrassment... then God commanded them to perform the action of bringing forth water., Moshe got angry with the people ... and God was furious with Moses ...at this point God gave them the punishment for their earlier sin. Mei Meriva was just the trigger; it was not the primary cause."

Let us summarise the opinion of the Abarbanel. Moses is denied entry into the land of Israel as punishment for his sin. Which sin? The Abarbanel informs us that the real guilt was incurred due to Moses' part in shaping the Spies episode. At Mei Meriva, an experience in which the Meraglim story came back to haunt Moses, by highlighting Moses' role, and where Moses misdirects the situation because of it, God decides that the time has come to exact the punishment that had been waiting for Moses all this time.

ANALYSIS

Is the Ramban correct or the Abarbanel? Well they each have strong points and weak points to their approaches. For the Ramban, the connection with the meraglim does not enter into the picture. It is all Mei Meriva. For the Ramban, there are only two questions. First, why blame the people? Second, why mention this in connection with the Meraglim episode? The Ramban's answers

are technical. Even if we accept that Moshe mentions his own fate of denial of Eretz Yisrael alongside that of the entire nation, we still wonder why he blames the people for his non-entry, three times in Sefer Devarim! The answer that the people somehow engendered his personal fault is a strange one. Moses is the national leader. Obviously his actions have more than personal significance!

The Abarbanel explains beautifully why Moses connects his restriction with the Meraglim. But our problem is with the Torah which repeatedly (Bamidbar 20:12 ; 20:24; 27:14; Devarim 32:48-51) relates Moses non-entry to his lack of Kiddush-Hashem and 'emunah' at Mei Meriva specifically. This seriously weakens the Abarbanel's approach. Why, according to the Abarbanel is it in the interest of the Torah to hide Moses responsibility for the Meraglim? Wouldn't it be better to hear that even a "supporting role" can have devastating impact? We would learn a great deal if the Torah related Moshe's death to the Meraglim. But it doesn't! At least explicitly it seems otherwise.

The truth is that the mepharshim are trying their best. In reality it is the Torah which presents us with a strange contradiction:

- Sefer Bamidbar – Mei Meriva and Moses' fault.
- Sefer Devarim – Meraglim, and the people's fault.

This is a textual clash that is difficult to bridge.

THE SIN OF THE LEADER

Many have commented on the fact that there is a link between the Meraglim and Moses' non-entry to Eretz Yisrael. What I mean is this. That Moses is the leader of a particular generation. He lead them for forty years. But this generation is destined to stay in the Midbar, to die there. They will not enter the Land of Israel. How about Moses? Some wish to suggest that the greatest cause of Moses' restriction is that his leadership is over. Each generation has its leader, and if Moses' generation are restricted from the land then Moses too is restricted:

"Hakadosh Baruch Hu said to Moses: By what right do you wish to enter?

It is like a shepherd who loses the flock of the king...

God said to Moses: Your reputation is that you brought 600,000 (Israelites out of Egypt) and buried them in the wilderness. Now you wish to lead a new generation?" (Bamidbar Rabba 19:13)

This is just one of many of sources which tell us that Moses, as leader of a generation which is not worthy, bears a certain responsibility for that generation.

Let us think about this idea for a moment or two. If we accept this approach, then we are saying that in a way, Moses fate is sealed already at the time of Chet Hameraglim. From the moment that the Exodus generation, Moses' generation, is sentenced to death in the wilderness, Moshe is also destined to die with them in the wilderness. Whether we view this as a sort of "joint fate" or possibly more an issue of "ministerial responsibility", this takes us back to our pesukim in Devarim which attach Moshe's fate to the people and to the Meraglim.

So how does Mei Meriva fit in?

Rav Medan suggested the following explanation that I will pass on to you for your consideration.

In this section we have followed the approach of the Abarbanel suggesting that the Meraglim was the moment that sealed Moshe's fate. But here we shall depart from the Abarbanel and analyse Moshe's leadership failure differently.

We can only blame Moses if he did something wrong at the Meraglim. Did he fail in some way as a leader? The Abarbanel suggests that he failed in the definition of the mission. Rav Medan suggests that it was his failure in his response to the Spies that was Moses failure. He should have publicly denounced their report, he should have argued and silenced them. Instead, what do we see?

"At the end of the forty days they returned from scouting the land. They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community ... They said: 'We came to the land you sent us to; indeed it does flow with milk and honey... However the people who inhabit the country are powerful, and the cities are fortified and large; moreover, we saw he giants there. Amalek lives in the Southern region ...' Calev hushed the people before Moses and said, 'Let us by all means go up... for we shall surely overcome it.' But the men who had gone up with him said: 'We cannot go up...' The whole community broke into loud cries ... 'Let us head back to Egypt.' Then Moses and Aaron fell on their faces before the assembled congregation of Israelites. And Joshua son of Nun and Calev son of Yephunneh Rent their clothes and challenged the community: ' The land which we passed through is an exceedingly good land. If God desires us, he will give us the land..' (Bamidbar 13:25-14:8)

How does Moshe react? How does he respond? He is nothing other than passive? He faces God rather than the people, falling on his face in prayer and supplication. Joshua and Calev take the role that we would have hoped that Moshe would have taken. They fight, they argue, they encourage. But with the sense of panic and hysteria within the camp, they fail to convince the masses. We wonder what might have happened had Moshe stood up defiantly to back them, had Aharon raised his voice. We wonder whether the national desperation might have been fuelled by Moshe's silence, by his helplessness.

On this backdrop it is not difficult to see that Moshe lapsed in his leadership role during the episode of the meraglim. He failed to lead; pure and simple! He let events take their course, but he didn't intervene.

MEI MERIVA

Now let us read the passage of Mei Meriva. It will sound rather familiar:

"The community was without water and they joined against Moshe and Aharon. The people quarrelled with Moshe, saying, 'If only we had perished when our brothers perished before the Lord. Why have you brought God's congregation to the wilderness to die... Why did you bring us out of Egypt to bring us to this place... Moses and Aaron stepped away from the congregation to the Tent of Meeting and they fell on their faces...' (20:2-5)

Why don't they argue? Why are they silent?

In issuing their punishment, God says:

"Because you did not trust in Me to affirm my sanctity in the sight of the Israelite people therefore you shall not

lead this congregation into the Land that I have given them." (20:12)

One might suggest that Mei Meriva was presented to Moshe as a "tikkun," an opportunity for repair. He had a situation in which he should have confronted the disgruntled throngs and spoken to them in the name of God. Mei Meriva is simply a "replay" of Moses' inaction with the Meraglim (and you can examine the pesukim to draw out the textual parallels of which there are many.)

Might we suggest that Moses' fate was initially set during the failure of the Meraglim. There, he let his generation, and God, down, by running to God rather than facing the nation. In the crucial minutes and hours, a momentum took root that was unstoppable.

Mei Meriva was Moshe's second chance. He could have changed his fate. But he acted in the same manner as he had acted earlier; a stance of passivity, turning to God, away from the people. He had not corrected his leadership flaw. He could not continue to lead. Notice how the verse says not that he may not enter Canaan, but rather that he may not "lead the congregation." His flaw was a leadership flaw.

Now notice something else about Devarim 1:37. It contains a pointed footnote about Yehoshua:

"When the Lord heard your complaint, he was angry. He vowed: Not one of these men, this evil generation,

shall see the good land that I swore to your fathers – none except Calev ben Yephunneh; he shall see it ... because of you the Lord was incensed with me too and he said: You shall not enter it either. JOSHUA BIN NUN WHO ASSISTS YOU, HE SHALL ENTER IT..." (1:34-37)

Notice how Yehoshua is mentioned as a counterweight to Moshe. After all, when the people caused trouble, Joshua spoke out.

IN CONCLUSION

There are some who wish to posit that Devarim describes Moshe's public sin, the Meraglim, whereas Bamidbar focuses upon his personal sin, Mei Meriva. If this is so, then indeed we have a multifaceted reality. But we have suggested a different relationship between the two. That in essence, Moshe's failure at the Meraglim, and at Mei Meriva, are both reflective of the same leadership flaw. Despite the difficulties and seeming contradictions between the various parshiot, maybe they are not so contradictory after all! If this does all come down to a problem with Moshe's skill as national figurehead, then maybe we can sympathise with Moshe, who feels that he is personally innocent, and therefore, worthy of entering the Promised Land. If this is true then maybe Moshe is correct when he accused Bnei Yisrael of preventing his entry into Eretz Yisrael.

Shabbat Shalom

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