YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Beha’alotekha**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

**“We Are Journeying to the Place of Which the Lord Said”**

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Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

The book of *Bamidbar* opens with a wonderful sense that the final destination is within reach: the people of Israel left Egypt, received the Torah at Mount Sinai, and built the *Mishkan*,and the plan is that they will enter the Land of Israel in the near future.[[1]](#footnote-1) Of course, all this takes place under the continued leadership of Moshe. The optimistic feeling that accompanies these portions of the Torah finds expression, among other ways, in the repeated appearance of the root *t-o-v*, "good," in Moshe's conversation with Chovav the son of Reuel and in the invitation he extends to him to join the journey to the promised good:

And Moshe said to Chovav, the son of Reuel the Midianite, Moshe's father-in-law: We are journeying to the place of which the Lord said: I will give it you; come you with us, and we will do you good; for the Lord has spoken good concerning Israel… And it shall be, if you go with us, it shall be, that whatever good the Lord shall do to us, the same will we do to you. (*Bamidbar* 10:29, 32)[[2]](#footnote-2)

Then, before the account of the sins of the generation of the wilderness (at Tavera and at Kivrot ha-Ta'ava) and their ramifications, we find the following two verses framed in inverted *nuns*:

And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moshe said: Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered; and let those who hate You flee before You. And when it rested, he said: Return, O Lord, to the ten thousands of the families of Israel. (*Bamidbar* 10:35-36)

*Chazal* valued these verses to the point that they saw them as constituting a book in itself, just like the other books of the Torah:

Our Rabbis taught: "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moshe said." For this section, the Holy One, blessed be He, provided signs above and below, to teach that this is not its place. Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi] said: It is not on that account, but because it ranks as a separate book. With whom does the following dictum of Rav Shmuel bar Nachmani in the name of Rabbi Yonatan agree? "’She [Wisdom] has hewn out her seven pillars’ (*Mishlei* 9:1) – this refers to the seven books of the Torah.” With whom? With Rabbi [Yehuda HaNasi]. (*Shabbat* 115b-116a)

This midrashic exposition even has a halakhic implication. The minimum measure of a Torah scroll that must be saved from a fire on Shabbat is eighty-five letters – the length of the section beginning with "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward":

If a Torah scroll is effaced, if eighty-five letters can be gathered therein, such as the section: "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward," we must save it; if not, we may not save it." (*Shabbat* 116a)

**The Sin**

These verses describe what would have happened if the people had not sinned. Were it not for Israel's sin, entering the land would have been simple: When the ark would set forward, the people would follow in its wake, while God would disperse enemies and haters and then immediately return to His place of rest over the camp of Israel. However, this scenario was not realized; instead, the reality became more and more complicated following the sin.

Already two verses earlier, on the verse, "And they set forward from the mount of the Lord, a three days’ journey" (*Bamidbar* 10:33), *Chazal* comment:

In the Midrash (*Yelamdeinu*), "And they set forward" – they set forward from the mount of the Lord three days’ journey; like a child coming out of school who runs away, so did they run away from Mount Sinai a three days’ journey, for they learned a lot of Torah at Sinai" (*Tosafot*, *Shabbat* 116a)

This is not the plain meaning of the verse itself; however, as with many other *midrashim*, the underlying idea is based on what emerges from other verses in the section.

First, one can see a difference between the people of Israel, who journey “**from** the mountain of the Lord” (*Bamidbar* 10: 3), and Moshe, who says they are journeying "**to** the place of which the Lord said" (*Bamidbar* 10:29). Moshe focuses on the grand destination, whereas the people of Israel focus on the fact that they are journeying from the mountain of the Lord, and it seems that they are afraid of additional commandments being cast upon them. At the same time, they are also afraid of the Land of Israel, because they know there will be a high demand there for connection and a relationship with God; there they will stand before Him constantly, because this is the land toward which God’s eyes are directed at all times (*Devarim* 11:12). From the perspective of one who is running away from the mountain of God, the journey to the Land of Israel is an instance of "running away from You, to You," as formulated by Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Gabirol in his *Keter Malkhut.*

Second, it is impossible to claim that journeying from Mount Sinai expresses a forward-looking view – for we see later that they do not really turn forward and abandon the past. On the contrary, they immediately remember "the fish that we would eat in Egypt for nought" (*Bamidbar* 11:5). They are immersed in the past because it is more convenient and imposes no spiritual demand upon them. Despite all the difficulty of their bondage, they choose to remember the good part of slavery and to ignore the suffering.

We find the root of Israel's failure and sin in these two points: fear of the imposition of additional *mitzvot*,and nostalgia for the Egyptian bondage.

**Lessons of the Journey**

Why, then, did the Torah choose to record these two verses that were never fulfilled? It seems that the Torah wishes to teach us several guiding principles for determining the ways in which we cope with the challenges we face.

First, the simple account of the potential entry into the Land of Israel – with the ark of God before them, His enemies being scattered from before Him, and the immediate rest that follows this – illustrates the power of faithful walking before God, and the heavy price of straying from the path. As God stated with regard to Avraham: "Walk before Me, and be wholehearted" (*Bereishit* 17:1). The Torah sets a lofty ideal before us, alongside the necessity of facing difficulties with full faithfulness in the word of God – as Calev said to the people in the incident involving the spies: "We should go up at once, and possess it; for we are well able to overcome it" (*Bamidbar* 13:30), and like the words of Rabbi Elazar ben Dordaya: "The matter depends upon me alone" (*Avoda Zara* 17a).

Second, it is man's duty to focus on the great vision to be aspired to, even if it is difficult to achieve; "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint" (*Mishlei* 29:18). The very mention and presentation of a vision reify it in the world of ideas and bring it closer to being actualized in concrete reality – as long as there is a readiness to dream and hope:

Rabbi Yona said in the name of Rabbi Zeira: Whoever goes seven days without a dream is called evil, as it is stated: "And he that has it shall abide satisfied [*save'a*]; he shall not be visited with evil" (*Mishlei* 19:23). Read not "*save'a*" [satisfied], but rather *sheva* [seven]. (*Berakhot* 14a)

A person who does not dream and aspire does not fulfill his duty in his world and is therefore called evil. The good person is one who is prepared to dream and set goals for himself.

Third, "Behold, this only have I found, that God made man upright; but they have sought out many inventions" (*Kohelet* 7:29). The Torah contains two descriptions of the way to reach the Land of Israel – one in only two verses, and the second in a long account that spans the books of *Bamidbar*, *Devarim*, and *Yehoshua*. One is short and simple, while the second is long, winding, and complicated. It is said in the name of the Kotzker Rebbe regarding the verse: "For in much wisdom is much vexation" (*Kohelet* 1:18) – "but nevertheless, we seek to add wisdom." There is no obligation to complicate life – simplicity and straightforwardness would be preferable – but once matters have become entangled, we should increase wisdom from the situation. This is what our Sages said:

Rav Ada son of Rabbi Chanina said: Had not Israel sinned, only the five books of the Torah and the book of *Yehoshua* would have been given them, [the latter] because it records the disposition of the Land of Israel [among the tribes]. What is the reason? "For much wisdom proceeds from much anger" (*Kohelet* 1:18). Had Israel not sinned, we would not have needed any of the words of the prophets, but now that they have sinned, we have the wisdom mentioned at the end of the verse: "For in much wisdom there is much vexation." (*Nedarim* 22b)

We learn three principles from these two verses: Wholeheartedness and commitment; vision, dreaming, and the setting of goals; and the aspiration for simplicity and straightforwardness. May we all merit the fulfillment of the verse: "That the wise man may hear, and increase in learning" (*Mishlei* 1:5).

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Beha'alotekha* 5778 (2018).]

1. As the Torah states, "It is eleven days’ journey from Chorev to Kadesh-Barnea by the way of Mount Seir" (*Devarim* 1:2).  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have discussed elsewhere why it was desired that other nations be partners in the journey to the Land of Israel. Here, I will merely note that this desire is connected to the fact that "the father of a multitude of nations have I made you" (*Bereishit* 17:5). The people of Israel must be a positive influence on the outside world, i.e., the nations of the world.  [↑](#footnote-ref-2)