**THE TANACH STUDY CENTER www.tanach.org**

***In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag***

**Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag**

**TEHILLIM PEREK 78 & SEFER BAMIDBAR**

Our study of Sefer Bamidbar thus far has shown how God's high hopes for the generation of "dor ha'midbar" (chapters 1->10) were shattered by the tragic events of the "mitaavim" and the "meraglim", etc. (chapters 11->25). What went wrong? WHY was "dor ha'midbar" a failure? In Sefer Tehillim (chapter 78) we find an explanation of the underlying reason for Bnei Yisrael's sinful behavior, an interpretation which takes on additional significance

today.

MASKIL L'ASSAF & SHIRAT HA'AZINU

In Tehillim chapter 78, we find a lesson in historical perspective. The psalm reviews some 500 years of Jewish History - from the time of the Exodus until the building of the first Temple (Bet Ha'Mikdash).

Let's begin with its opening sentence (78:1), for it contains

two significant points:

"A "maskil" (a song to learn from) of ASSAF - HA'AZINA ami torati - Listen my people to my teaching; hatu az'n'chem L'IMRAY-FEE - turn your ear to what I say.

Note the obvious parallel to "shirat ha'azinu", which begins:

"HA'AZINU ha'shamayim v'adabeyra, v'tishma ha'aretz IMRAY-FEE" (see Dvarim 32:1)

This parallel is thematic as well, for in SHIRAT HA'AZINU, just like Tehillim 78, God calls upon Bnei Yisrael to LEARN FROM ITS HISTORY: "ZCHOR Y'MOT OLAM - BINU SHNOT DOR V'DOR...

[See Dvarim 32:7, and its continuation. There God warns Bnei Yisrael of what may happen should Bnei Yisrael disobey Him once they have entered the Land.]

In the spirit of SHIRAT HA'AZINU, Assaf composes a psalm in which he calls upon Bnei Yisrael to learn from its history. Why did Assaf find it necessary to compose this psalm. What does it add to SHIRAT HA'AZINU? To uncover its significance, we must consider who Assaf was and WHEN he lived, [i.e. during the time period of David ha'melech].

Once David became King over all of Israel, he took several important steps towards unifying the country and building the Bet Ha'Mikdash. First, he captures Yerushalayim (see II Samuel 5:1-10). Then he brings the "aron" from Kiryat Ye'arim to Yerushalayim (see II Samuel chp. 6). Finally, he wishes to build the Bet Ha'Mikdash, a permanent house for the "aron". God tells David that Am Yisrael must wait one more generation before the Mikdash can be built, however, David's own son - Shlomo - will build it. [See II Samuel chapter 7.]

Even though David himself cannot build the Mikdash, he prepares everything that his son Shlomo may possibly need to build it. [This intensive preparation is detailed in I Divrei Ha'yamim chapters 22 thru 29.] One of the first steps which David takes is to appoint ASSAF as the chief Levite (see I Divrei Ha'yamim 16:7). In fact, one of the first psalms which Assaf composed is the "hodu" which we say every morning in psukei d'zimra (ibid 16:8-30) - written for the joyous occasion when the "aron" was brought to Yerushalayim.

The appointment of a chief Levite is significant for in addition to their technical duties in the Mikdash, the Leviim are expected to provide spiritual leadership as well (see Dvarim 33:10). Towards that purpose, they composed not only the music for certain psalms, but also their lyrics.

With this backdrop, we can better appreciate what prompted Assaf to compose Tehillim chapter 78 ["maskil l'Assaf"].

As chief Levite during the time of the construction of the first Bet Ha'Mikdash, Assaf recognizes the spiritual potential of his time period. For the first time since the Exodus, Am Yisrael has finally attained national unity, economic prosperity, and security from its enemies. As Chazal explain, this was truly a messianic era.

As their spiritual leader, Assaf wants to make sure that this time, Am Yisrael will not allow this momentous opportunity to slip by (as had happened before). In Sefer Bamidbar, Am Yisrael had almost achieved this ideal level as they left on their journey from Har Sinai towards Eretz Canaan. However, due to their sins, that original dream never reached fruition. Now, some five hundred years later, Assaf is worried that this pattern may repeat itself once again. Therefore, he calls upon Am Yisrael to learn from their history:

"Listen my people... I will expound a theme, lessons from the past, things we have heard and known, that our fathers have told us...   
 He established a decree... charging our fathers to make them known to their children, that a future generation might know,

and in turn tell their children that they put confidence in God

and not forget His great deeds, but observe His commandments...

(78:1-7)

WHAT WENT WRONG

After this opening call, Assaf introduces his main point, challenging the people not to follow the ways of their ancestors:

"be not like their fathers, a REBELLIOUS and DEFIANT generation

["dor sorer u'moreh"], a generation who did NOT PREPARE THEIR

HEARTS ["dor lo hechiyn libo"], who was not STEADFAST to God in

spirit ["v'lo ne'emana l'El rucho"] (78:8)

Here we find the underlying reason WHY "dor ha'midbar" failed - "dor lo hechiyn libo..." - that generation did not prepare itself for their Divine destiny, they did not remain steadfast in their faith. Preparation of the heart ["hachanat ha'lev"] is the most important ingredient of any spiritual endeavor. Without it, miracles become only momentary salvation, but leave no lasting

impression.

Assaf wants his generation to be different than their forefathers, to properly PREPARE themselves for the challenges now created by having a Mikdash. They must understand WHY they are chosen, for what purpose. This is the obligation of shevet Levi, for they are the educators.

The psalm continues with a review of various examples of Bnei Yisrael's lack of trust in God during their journey thru the desert (78:9-33). Then, returning to the opening theme of Bnei Yisrael's lack of spiritual preparation, the psalm notes their insincerity, even when they repented:

"After He punished (killed) them, they turned to Him and sought

God once again... Yet they deceived Him with their speech, lied

to Him with their words; their HEARTS WERE NOT READY, they were

not STEADFAST... ["v'libam lo nachon iymo...]" (78:34-37)

It is here, at the conclusion of the first section of the psalm, were we find the pasuk of "v'hu rachum". After summarizing their sins in the desert, Assaf explains why God, despite these sins, gives Bnei Yisrael a second chance:

"But He, being merciful, forgave iniquity ["v'hu rachum y'chaper

avon"], and would not destroy ["v'lo yashchit"], He restrained

His wrath time and again and did not give full vent to his fury,

for He remembered that they are but flesh, a passing breath

["ruach holech"] that does not return." (78:38-39)

Here, we find God's MIDOT HA'RACHAMIM (attributes of Mercy) which allow Bnei Yisrael a second chance, even though they sin. However, God only enacts these attributes for a reason, i.e. to give Bnei Yisrael another chance to prepare themselves properly for the next opportunity of redemption which may arise. If they don't, his wrath may be kindled once again.

This key pasuk reminds us that if and when God enacts His mercy, it is in order that we take advantage of this new opportunity to do what we should have done originally. This is what "teshuva" is all about. [See also Dvarim chapter 9, especially 9:24-27.]

The second half of the psalm continues with a rebuke of "dor ha'midbar" for not remembering God's miracles in Egypt (78:40-53). The final section recalls how Bnei Yisrael rebelled once again, even after God had assisted them in their conquest of the Promised Land (78:54-66). In His anger for their behavior during the time of the Shoftim, God destroyed the Mishkan in Shilo and rejected the leadership of shevet Yosef, choosing instead the house of David ("shevet Yehuda") and Yerushalayim ("har tzion") for the Temple:

"He rejected the tribe of Yosef... He did choose the tribe of

Yehudah, HAR TZION which He loved, He built His MIKDASH like the

heavens... He chose David, His servant... to tend His people,

Yisrael... He tended them with a blameless heart; with skillful

hands he led them. (78:67-72)

Clearly, Assaf composed this psalm in light of the failure of earlier generations and in recognition of the potential of his own generation. His goal is to encourage Bnei Yisrael to rise to the new challenge offered by the construction of the first Bet Ha'Mikdash and the establishment of David's monarchy.

With this psalm in mind, we can better appreciate the overall structure of Sefer Bamidbar. As we explained, the first ten chapters reflect the ideal manner by which Bnei Yisrael should have entered Eretz Canaan [with the SHCHINA in their midst]. The middle fifteen chapters (11->25) explain how and why this dream was shattered. Now, in the final section of Sefer Bamidbar (chapters 26->36), we return once again to the ideal, as God prepares the new generation with numerous commands concerning their upcoming conquest and inheritance of Eretz Canaan. This may explain why Parshat Masei records ALL of Bnei Yisrael's encampments in the desert, beginning with the Exodus from Egypt. In doing so, the Torah emphasizes the connection between the new generation and original goals of "dor ha'midbar" as they left Egypt some forty years earlier.

As we will see, this same theme will continue both in Sefer Devarim and in Sefer Yehoshua.

shabbat shalom,

menachem