YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Meir Shpiegelman**

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**Dedicated in memory of   
Rabbanit Yocheved bat Todros Menos Eliyahu z"l   
whose yahrzeit is the 14th of Sivan,   
by her granddaughter Vivian Singer**

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**PARASHAT BEHAALOTEKHA**

**The Sin of Bnei Yisrael**

The episode of the quails gives rise to several questions. One of them is why God promises Bnei Yisrael that they will eat meat for an entire month, when in fact, “While the meat was still between their teeth, before [it was chewed], the Lord’s anger was kindled against the people…” (*Bamidbar* 11:33).

Another question concerns the role of Eldad and Medad. Obviously, a person does not prophesy at his own initiative. God has to grant him prophecy – and this being the case, it is not clear why God causes Eldad and Medad to prophesy. What role do they play in the *parasha*?

Our final question for now – and the most problematic – is about Moshe’s lack of faith in God. God promises that the nation will eat meat for a whole month, and Moshe questions God’s ability to provide enough:

If flocks and herds would be slain for them, would it suffice for them? If all the fish of the sea would be gathered together for them, would it suffice for them? (*Bamidbar* 11:22)

These words recall the story of Sara Imenu, who was rebuked for voicing a similar question.[[1]](#footnote-1) It seems that God should also have been angry at Moshe, who had not only seen but in fact actively participated in Divine wonders, and yet now doubted God’s ability to produce meat for the nation. However, contrary to our expectations, God’s reaction is rather mild; He merely promises that Moshe will see how God provides meat for all (11:23).

**Bnei Yisrael’s Complaint**

At first glance, Bnei Yisrael’s complaint seems to center around the monotony of eating the manna:

But now our soul is dried up; there is nothing at all except this manna to look at. (11:6)

They claim that what they miss in the wilderness is the range of foods they remember from Egypt: here, there is nothing “except this manna to look at,” while in Egypt there had been many and diverse types of food. However, a review of the *parasha* indicates that this is not in fact the real hardship for them. The quails appear, and we read:

And the people rose up all that day, and all night, and all the next day, and gathered the quails; he who gathered the least gathered ten heaps, and they spread them all around the camp. (11:32)

The gathering goes on non-stop for two whole days, which is problematic in two respects. First, it proves that the “monotony” of the manna is not as critical a problem as they claim it to be. They simply continue gathering the quails; two whole days go by before they eat any. Second, and worse: their gathering of more and more quails reflects a lack of faith in God. God promised they would eat meat for a month; gathering so much reflects a lack of faith in that promise. This lack of faith runs so deep that Bnei Yisrael are willing to wait two days before starting to eat the quails, while they engage in collecting a large stock of them.

The reality is that life in the wilderness, under God’s constant providence, is a difficult test. A person cannot live for an extended period of time not knowing what he will have to eat tomorrow and what he will feed his children. Life in the wilderness demanded absolute faith in God, and those whose faith was not sufficiently firm set out to gather themselves a large supply of meat.

However, the problem may be more serious than that. The very first time that God provided manna for Bnei Yisrael, there were those who kept some aside until the morning, going against God’s explicit prohibition, and the same pattern repeats itself here. The gathering of the meat indicates a desire to be liberated from dependence on God, to forgo His providence. We see a hint to this when God tells Moshe that Bnei Yisrael regret having left Egypt. The Torah does not record any statement here reflecting such regret (although it does elsewhere), and were it not for God’s testimony, we might have thought the people were simply nostalgic about one aspect of life in Egypt that was lacking in the wilderness. But God gives their words a different interpretation, and it seems that the root of their discontent is more profound. God criticizes the nation, and tells Moshe they wish to relieve themselves of God’s direction:

For you have rejected the Lord Who is among you, and have wept before Him, saying: Why did we come out of Egypt? (11:20)

**The Test of the Quails**

In order to clarify their intention, God presents them with a test. If they are eager to eat the meat that God brings down for them from the heavens, then their complaint did indeed arise from the monotony of the manna. If, however, they set about gathering the quails, this will demonstrate that actually, they do not wish to be dependent on God – which is a far more severe problem.

This helps us understand Moshe’s seemingly audacious words to God. Moshe relates to the fact that Bnei Yisrael are not complaining about the manna, but about the constant dependence on God. They want food that comes through natural processes, not in a miraculous manner. Moshe’s point is that there is no *natural* way of providing meat for a camp that numbers six hundred thousand men, by slaughtering flocks and herds or going fishing. God answers that He rules over the laws of nature, and therefore He can bring quails in a “natural” way, since for God there is no difference between nature and miracles:

And there went forth a wind from the Lord, and brought across quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, about a day's journey on this side, and a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and about two cubits above the face of the earth. (11:31)[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Revelation Via the Quails**

Indeed, the provision of the quails serves in our *parasha* – as in other *parashot* – as a symbol of the constant Divine Providence over Bnei Yisrael. When God tells the nation about the meat that will be given to them, He commands that they sanctify themselves:

And you – say to the people: Sanctify yourselves for tomorrow, and you shall eat meat... (11:18)

We find a similar requirement of sanctification (for three days) prior to the giving of the Torah, but in that instance, the reason for sanctification is clear. Why must Bnei Yisrael sanctify themselves in anticipation of the arrival of the quails?

Our *parasha*, which records the provision of the quails and the manna to Bnei Yisrael, recalls the earlier *parasha* in which quails and manna were mentioned together – *Parashat Beshalach*, in *Sefer Shemot*. These are the only two *parashot* in the Torah that mention both manna and quails, but there are conspicuous differences between them. In *Sefer Shemot*, the emphasis is on the provision of manna, with only the briefest mention of quails. In our *parasha*, on the other hand, the Torah gives only a general description of the descent of the manna, with a lengthy elaboration regarding the quails. Another difference between the *parashot* concerns the time when the quails appear: *Sefer Shemot* describes them descending at twilight, along with and as an addition to the manna, and the quantity is accordingly smaller.[[3]](#footnote-3) In our *parasha*, the Torah notes that Bnei Yisrael collected the meat over the course of a day, a night, and the following day, which means the quails started arriving in the morning. A comparison of the *parashot* shows that the meat given to the people in our *parasha* serves as a replacement for the manna they were given in *Parashat Beshalach*, after they grew tired of it.

The provision of meat and of manna are revelations of God to Bnei Yisrael. Although it is not direct revelation, it proves God’s existence, His presence, and His power. For this reason, the provision of the meat and the manna is accompanied by commandments to Bnei Yisrael. In *Parashat Beshalach*, along with the *manna*, God commands them to observe Shabbat. Shabbat is a reminder and declaration that God’s presence is in the world, and it is therefore appropriate that this commandment be transmitted to Bnei Yisrael alongside God’s demonstration of His presence through provision of the *manna*.

Bnei Yisrael are aware of the revelation in the quails and in the manna. As I have noted elsewhere, Bnei Yisrael repeatedly ask for water and food as a way of testing whether God is in their midst. This is explicit in the incident at Refidim:

And the people quarreled with Moshe, and they said: Give us water, that we may drink… And the name of the place was called Masa and Meriva, because of the quarrel (*riv*)of Bnei Yisrael, and because they tried (*nasotam*)the Lord, saying: Is the Lord among us or not? (*Shemot* 17:2-7)

In view of this, it is possible that God commands Bnei Yisrael to sanctify themselves because the provision of meat serves in place of revelation. Hence, it is possible that the giving of the quails should also have been accompanied by a new commandment. Perhaps God wanted to command Bnei Yisrael once again concerning Shabbat, since the quails were meant to rain down for a month, and hence it would be appropriate to command the nation not to gather them on Shabbat.

What happens is that Bnei Yisrael gather up the quails, thereby showing that they do not want to receive meat from God in daily installments. The Torah emphasizes this point by recounting that the people gathered the quails over the course of the day, the night, and the following day. This period – two days and a night – parallels the period that it is permissible to eat of a *korban* *shelamim* (peace offering). But whereas eating of the *shelamim* represents the forging of a covenant with God, Bnei Yisrael gather up the quails rather than eating immediately, turning the meat (conceptually) into “*notar*” – the meat left over after the period when it may be eaten – symbolically disqualifying, or rejecting, the covenant with God that it represents.

**Moshe’s Reaction**

In previous episodes of Am Yisrael rebelling against God, Moshe defended them with all his might; he has never suggested abandoning them. Now, in our *parasha*, Moshe suddenly cannot bear them any longer:

And Moshe said to God: Why have You dealt badly with Your servant, and why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You lay the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive all this people? Did I bring them forth, that You say to me: Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries the sucking child, to the land which You swore to their fathers? (*Bamidbar* 11:11-12)

In view of the explanation above, we can understand why Moshe reacts as he does. Bnei Yisrael do not wish to receive their sustenance from God, they do not want His providence and guidance, and thus they do not want Moshe’s leadership, either. Moshe senses that Am Yisrael do not want him, and so he no longer wants to lead them.

In fact, Moshe reacts similarly in other situations. During his very first mission, following the Divine revelation at the burning bush, Bnei Yisrael criticize Moshe and he turns to God with bitterness, questioning why he was sent to them. He understands that his leadership depends on the nation’s acceptance of him: if they want him, he will be their leader; if they do not want him, he will not have that role. Therefore, the problem that troubles Moshe right at the start, at the burning bush, is: “They will not believe me.” On other occasions, too, when Bnei Yisrael have complaints against Moshe, he retreats immediately to the Tent of Meeting.[[4]](#footnote-4) In our *parasha*, when Moshe senses that behind Bnei Yisrael’s complaints lies a desire to replace him, he asks God to do just that.

Indeed, God accedes – at least partially – to his request. Just as God accepts the nation’s complaint and brings the quails, so He also accepts Moshe’s plea. He commands him to appoint seventy elders to assist him – but at the same time, He also causes Eldad and Medad to prophesy. Clearly, Moshe and Aharon understand that Eldad and Medad represent an alternative leadership. The seventy elders, together with Moshe and Aharon, made a total of 72 elders – six for each tribe. Instead of Moshe and Aharon, Eldad and Medad, who also have received prophecy, could be the extra two who join the seventy.[[5]](#footnote-5) Yehoshua understands immediately that Eldad and Medad represent an alternative leadership, which is why he proposes that they be imprisoned.

Attention should be paid to a conspicuous difference between the appointment of the elders in our *parasha* and the appointment of the judges in *Parashat Yitro*. Here, God commands that Moshe appoint seventy leaders, but the qualities required of them are completely different from those required of the judges.[[6]](#footnote-6) The judges appointed as per Yitro’s advice are chosen for their professional qualities: they are upright, “men of truth, who hate unjust gain,” etc. (*Shemot* 18:21). The seventy elders proposed in our *parasha* do not require these qualities; all that is required is that they be among the “elders of the people and its officers” (*Bamidbar* 11:16), Moshe does not choose seventy men who are *worthy* of being leaders, but rather seventy elders who are *actually functioning* as leaders.

The significance of the change in the criteria required for leadership is far-reaching: instead of God choosing individuals worthy of leadership, Moshe selects people the nation has chosen to lead them, and God then bestows His spirit on this chosen group. The Torah connects the episode of the quails with the appointment of the seventy elders in order to emphasize the parallel and common theme linking the two stories: the manna is replaced by quails, and the judges are replaced by the elders. The nation rejects spiritual leadership in favor of natural, earthly leadership, just as it rejects the miraculous, heavenly manna in favor of the natural quails, which the people set about gathering at their own discretion.

To complete the transition, God grants prophecy to Eldad and Medad. This hints to Moshe and Aharon that a changeover of the entire leadership is underway, and henceforth they no longer have a role.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moshe does not resist this process: as I have noted in a number of places, Moshe believes he is unnecessary, and the people can connect directly to God. Hence, his response to the news that Eldad and Medad are prophesying is, “Would that all God’s people were prophets” (11:29), such that there would be no need for any leaders at all.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish; edited by Sarah Rudolph)

1. We even find an instance of a death sentence for lack of faith in the words of the prophet (see *Melakhim* II 7:2); Moshe’s words, then, after receiving prophecy directly from God, certainly seem worthy of punishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. God chooses to meet the nation’s needs with fowl, which are a “halfway point” between the fish and the cattle mentioned by Moshe. In the *shiur* on *Parashat Noach* earlier in this series, we discussed the difference between the sea and the dry land; to this we might add that birds are a halfway point between them. The sea has no impurity but also no holiness; on land, there is impurity and there is holiness. The birds, as a bridge between sea and dry land, are used for attaining purity and holiness. With God’s help, this will be explained further in a future *shiur*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. If the quantity had been enough to suffice for all of Bnei Yisrael, then Moshe would already have seen with his own eyes how God provided meat for the entire nation, and would not question this in our *parasha*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also the discussion of Moshe’s appointment in the *shiur* on *Parashat Shemot*. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Chazal* view this episode as a breaking point in Moshe’s leadership; they teach that Eldad and Medad prophesied that Moshe would not enter the Promised Land. This indicates that according to *Chazal*, this decree arose already in our *parasha*. (I will elaborate further on Mei Meriva in a future *shiur*, with God’s help.) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It may be that the Torah mentions Yitro in juxtaposition to the episode of the quails precisely for the purpose of emphasizing this difference. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. This change comes with a price, and indeed, Miriam and Aharon speak in a manner that subverts Moshe’s leadership. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)