YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASHAT CHUKAT**

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This *Shiur* is dedicated *Le-zekher Nishmat*
Avraham Mordechai Belaciano ben Faride, zl whose yahrzeit is 14 Tamuz.
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Dedicated in memory of Chayim Zvi be Moshe Reinitiz z”l of
Nasgykallo, Hungary.

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**The Emergence of the Second Generation**

**By Rav Yair Kahn**

**I. Déjà Vu?**

Yisrael arrived, the entire congregation, at the wilderness of Zin in the first month [of the fortieth year] ... (*Bamidbar* 20:1)

Rashi: "The entire congregation" means the congregation that was complete, for [the generation of the Exodus] had died in the desert, and these had remained alive.

Here we are finally introduced to the second generation, who will succeed where their predecessors had failed. In a previous *shiur*, we noted the *midrash* that defines *Sefer Bamidbar* as the book that distinguishes between light and dark – between the first generation, who failed in their mission, and the second generation, who succeeded. We would thus expect the difference between these two generations to be as clear as night and day.

However, even a cursory glance at our *parasha* leads to the troubling conclusion that nothing seems to have changed. The same mistakes made by the first generation seem to be repeated by their successors. When we read the passages in which *Bnei Yisrael* complain about food and water, we are struck with the strange sensation of deja-vu. The recurrent theme of the first generation, "Why did you take us out of Egypt," is repeated by their offspring (*Bamidbar* 20:5 and 21:5).

Are we to conclude from this that there really is no significant difference between the two generations? Is the only difference rooted in one isolated incident that was not repeated by the second generation? In order to resolve this issue, we must take a closer and more critical look at those events which seem to recur.

**II. The Meaning of Freedom**

Let us first examine the complaint regarding the manna.

They set out from Mount Hor by way of Yam Suf to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey, and the people spoke against God and against Moshe, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." (*Bamidbar* 21:4-5)

The comparable complaint of the first generation is recorded in *Parashat* *Baha'alotekha*:

The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then *Yisrael* wept and said, "Who will feed us meat?! We remember the fish we used to eat *chinam* (for free) in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and garlic. Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" (*Bamidbar* 11:4-6)

 In their first complaint about the manna, *Bnei Yisrael* reminisce about the wonderful menu they had enjoyed while subject to Egyptian bondage. This is certainly a strange and ungrateful reaction, highlighted by the striking term "*chinam*" – for free. Even if we were to accept that the Egyptian slave-masters treated their Hebrew slaves to culinary delicacies, we can hardly be impressed by their generosity. *Bnei Yisrael* paid dearly for their meals with blood, sweat and tears! In contrast, how much did God charge for the manna that fell daily from the heavens?

 Our Sages, of course, noted the absurdity of this argument. Rashi quotes a *Sifrei* (*Beha'alotekha*, 29) which offers an insightful interpretation:

"We remember the fish" – Did they indeed receive fish for free? Does it not say, "Go and work, and straw will not be given to you"? If they would not give them even straw, would they give them fish? What, then, do they mean by "free?" [They mean] free from *mitzvot*.

According to this explanation, *Bnei Yisrael's* complaint revolved around the requirement to abide by the divine commandments imposed upon them. They reminisced about the unfettered life they led in Egypt before being bound by the divine imperative. The food they received in Egypt was not dependent upon halakhic behavior. Manna, in contrast, demanded restraint and acceptance of the halakhic norm; only a specific amount could be taken, and only on certain days, and all that was taken had to be finished within the time allotted by the law.

Let us try to uncover what lies at the root of this complaint. In *Beha'alotekha*, *Bnei Yisrael* have only recently been freed from bondage. The transition from slavery to freedom is complex and requires more than nullifying the possession of the slave-owner. The distinction between a free person and a slave is not merely a legal one, but an existential one as well. A free man shoulders responsibility, while a slave is totally dependent upon others. His life functions are controlled by his master. He makes no choices for himself and looks upon others to support him. He is not tormented by the consequences of his decisions because he does not decide. Although in a state of bondage, he is nonetheless free from the worries and responsibilities that are inherent to independence.

Our Sages had profound insight into the depths of human character and boldly proclaimed, "*Avda be-hefkeira nicha lei*" – a slave, from his limited perspective, prefers the lack of commitment which is typical of bondage (*Gittin* 13a). In fact, the Torah informs us that under certain circumstances, a person is apt to choose a life of slavery over freedom.

But if the slave declares, "I love my master, and my wife and children; I do not wish to be free"... (*Shemot* 21:5)

However, in such a case, the law requires that the ear of the slave be pierced. According to our Rabbis, this indicates that the decision to remain in slavery runs counter to the message of commitment to God, transmitted both in Egypt and at Sinai.

Then his master shall bring him ... to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever. (*Shemot* 21:6)

Rashi (quoting *Kiddushin* 22b) comments:

Why is it more appropriate to pierce [the slave's] ear, rather than any other part of his body? R. Yochanan ben Zakkai said ... The ear which heard at Sinai, "For to Me are *Bnei Yisrael* slaves," and then went and acquired an owner for himself – let it be pierced! R. Shimon expounded this verse beautifully: In what way are the door and the doorpost different from all other utensils in the house? God said: The door and the doorpost were witness in Egypt when I passed over [the houses of the Jews] and said, "For to Me are *Bnei Yisrael* slaves; they are My slaves" – and not slaves to slaves. Yet this person nevertheless went out and acquired a master for himself; let him be pierced before them!

 In Judaism, religious commitment requires existential freedom. Although man must surrender his will unconditionally to God and absolutely accept the divine imperative, God is not interested in obedience that enslaves man existentially, but rather in commitment that uplifts man spiritually:

"And the writing was the writing of God, engraved (*charut*) upon the tablets" – Do not read "engraved" (*charut*), but rather "free" (*cherut*), for no one is truly free except he who engages in Torah study. (*Avot* 6:2)

Man must be able to freely accept upon himself the halakhic norm along with the yoke of Heaven. He must be capable of exercising "free will" – the ability to choose between good and evil, between life and death. He must be willing to shoulder responsibility for those decisions. Free man redeems himself by choosing life. In sharp contrast, the slave prefers to free himself of responsibility; at the same time, however, he enslaves himself existentially. He accepts orders and acts accordingly so as not to be fettered by responsibility and tormented by decisions.

Although freed from Egyptian bondage, *Bnei Yisrael* had not as of yet been weaned from a slave mentality. Despite receiving the Torah and boldly proclaiming, "*na’aseh ve-nishma*," "We shall do and we shall hear," the transition from bondage to freedom had not been completed. Therefore, the people complained about the manna, which demanded the high price of spiritual responsibility and commitment. They reminisced about the uncommitted life of slavery typical of Egypt.

In last week's *shiur*, we noted that the decree was due in part to the nation's immaturity. They lacked the security and composure necessary to conquer Canaan. The "*telunot*" (complaints) reflected a character flaw of a people unwilling to assume the responsibility required to realize Jewish destiny. According to our analysis of the complaint regarding the manna, this deficiency can already be detected at the beginning of the journey from Sinai.

Based on this, we can explain the opinion (*Shabbat* 116a) that the *parasha* of "*Vayehi bi-nesoa*" was introduced in order to separate the negative events which precede the *parasha* (i.e. childishly escaping Sinai), from those which are recounted afterwards (the complaints at the beginning of the journey beginning with manna). Following the *parasha* of "*Vayihi bi-nesoa*," we noted a steady decline that continues through *Korach*. There is no attempt at downplaying the impression of deterioration. Why, then, was it necessary to insert "*vayihi bi-nesoa*" to separate specifically between these two iniquities?

It appears that the separation was introduced in order to distinguish between inherently incommensurate events. The sense of relief when leaving Sinai is unrelated to the process of decline that led up to the sin of the spies; it is merely a human reaction to the intensity and profound spiritual tension of *matan* *Torah*. On the other hand, the decree condemning the first generation to death in the wilderness is inherently connected to the "*telunot*" at the onset of the journey; there is a link between the complaint regarding the manna and the sin of the spies. Both reflect a basic character flaw typical of a nation raised in bondage.

**III. Frustration or Fear**

We are now ready to re-examine our *parasha*:

They set out from Mount Hor by way of Yam Suf to skirt the land of Edom. But the people grew restive on the journey and the people spoke against God and against Moshe, "Why did you make us leave Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread and no water, and we have come to loathe this miserable food." (*Bamidbar* 21:4-6)

Once again, it seems that the people, like their parents, complain about the Exodus from Egypt. However, upon closer analysis, we notice something odd about this complaint. Why do the people speak of dying in the wilderness? Although they are tired of eating manna for forty years, monotony is not usually fatal. Furthermore, why do they continue to complain about water? Didn't we read in the previous chapter that the well was restored? In addition, why did Yisrael become restive in this particular journey? After all, they've been wondering for forty years!

In order to appreciate this complaint, it is critical to consider the context. After Aharon's death, Yisrael were attacked by Canaanites, who according to our Sages, were Amalakites in disguise. The attack took place when Yisrael travelled on the path of Atarim, which Rashi identified as the path of the *meraglim*. *Yisrael*, then made a vow to Hashem: "If You will deliver this people into my hand, then I will make their cities into c*herem*" (21:2). *Cherem*, in this context, refers to consecrating the cities to Hashem by leaving them in a state of waste and not deriving human benefit from them. Why did Yisrael feel a need to make a vow before this particular war, unlike other wars that they waged in the wilderness?

When Yisrael emerged victorious, they named the location of the victory “Chorma,” and the reference is transparent. We recall Chorma from a previous incident. After the decree of the *meraglim*, the *ma'apilim* insisted on continuing towards Canaan. Moshe told them, "Go not up, for Hashem is not among you; that you be not smitten down before your enemies" (14:42). They didn't listen, however, and were destroyed by the Amalekites and Canaanites:

But they presumed to go up to the top of the mountain; and the ark of the covenant of Hashem and Moshe did not depart from the camp. Then the Amalekite and the Canaanite, who dwelt in that hill-country, came down, and smote them and beat them down unto **Chorma**. (14:44-45)

From that point on, Yisrael could not engage in battle, for Hashem was not with them. Now, at the end of the forty year decree, as *Yisrael* return to the path of the *meraglim* that leads to *Eretz Yisrae*l, they are again attacked again by Amalek-Canaan. Has the decree terminated? Will Hashem be with them? This is the significance of their vow. It is a prayer and a promise in anticipation of the return to the pre-decree state of: “When the Aron travelled, Moshe proclaimed: Hashem arise and scatter Your enemies" (10:35), in contrast to the *ma'apilim*, when the *aron* never left the camp.

*Yisrael* emerges victorious, and they now know that the decree is over. However, instead of continuing on the path of Atarim towards Canaan, they are directed back towards Yam Suf similar to the about face after the episode of the meraglim! (See 14:25). It seems clear that the people are not reminiscing about Egypt, but rather expressing their frustration at not immediately entering *Eretz Yisrael*. They are fed up with wilderness and its manna, and challenge Moshe: Were we taken out of Egypt in order to perish in the wilderness!? Wasn't the purpose of the Exodus to inherit *Eretz Yisrael*, a land of wheat fields and running water? They are impatient, not hesitant; they are brimming with confidence, not incapacitated by fear.

We find a parallel distinction regarding the water complaint. The first generation argues that they should never have been taken out of Egypt and placed in a life-threatening situation in the wilderness:

"Why did you bring us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?" (*Shemot* 17:3)

The argument of the second generation runs in the opposite direction, towards *Eretz Yisrael*, not back to Egypt.

The people quarreled with Moshe, saying, "If only we had perished when our brothers perished before Hashem! Why have you brought the Hashem's congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!" (*Bamidbar* 20:3-5)

 With the death of Miriam, the well is no longer available to the people. They find themselves in the wilderness with no source of water; they are dying of thirst and begin to complain. Surprisingly, they do not complain immediately about their thirst; first they point to the lack of wheat and figs, pomegranates and grapes, and as an afterthought they also mention the lack of water. This bizarre argument leaves no room for doubt about their true intentions. We all know what figs, grapes and pomegranates refer to, and it is obvious what was foremost on their minds. In spite of the lack of water, they complain about still being in this horrible wilderness. After forty years, it's time to enter *Eretz Yisrael*.

 It is worth noting, that in mentioning specifically figs pomegranates and grapes, *Yisrael* is referring to the *meraglim*, who returned to the camp with those three fruit.

And they came unto the valley of *Eshkol*, and cut down from there a branch with one cluster of grapes, and they bore it upon a pole between two; they took also of the pomegranates, and of the figs. (13:23)

They recall the report of the *meraglim* and are impatient to respond in the proper way.

In conclusion, the generation taken out of bondage was not able to fully free itself from the mindset characteristic of slaves. After the Exodus, they view God as a divine slave-master who has to care for their every need. Unwilling to assume personal responsibility, they complain every time their needs are not provided for. This trait expresses itself in the events which immediately follow the Exodus, such as the complaint regarding the lack of water. However, even after receiving the Torah and commencing on the march towards *Eretz Yisrael*, they continue to complain, longing for the simple, uncomplicated, and uncommitted life of Egypt. The climax is finally reached at the sin of the spies, when the fateful decree was issued. However, we can trace the roots of this decree to Masa and Meriva, when the nation redeemed from Egypt complained about the lack of water. This connection is expressed in a well-known passage from *Tehillim* recited every Friday evening:

Do not harden your hearts as in Meriva, as in the day of Masa in the wilderness; when your fathers tempted Me, proved Me, even though they saw My deeds. Forty years long did I loathe this generation and I said, It is a people that errs in their heart, and that do not know My ways; whereupon I swore in My wrath that they should not enter into My resting-place. (*Tehillim* 95:8-11)

 A careful reading of *parashat Chukat* reveals the metamorphosis of *Keneset Yisrael*. They are confident – not insecure; impatient – not hesitant. They find themselves in similar situations as their parents, but the subtleties that separate their respective responses distinguish night from day.

"And God distinguished between the light and the darkness" – This alludes to *Sefer Bamidbar*, which distinguishes between [the generation that] left Egypt and those who entered the Land. (*Bereishit* *Rabba* 3:5)