

Parshat Beshalach: Slave Mentality

Parshat Beshalach is a parsha of transition: From Egypt to Sinai, from the life of a slave to a life of Torah, from serving Pharaoh to service of God. As with any process of change, this process is not without its ups and downs. Our parsha has its highlights; the splitting of the sea and the shirat Hayam, the miracle of water coming from a rock, the remarkable war against Amalek. But also its downs: the fear at the sea, the complaining of the nation.

This week, we shall examine one short episode of the parsha and attempt to see what it might teach us about the Israelites first steps into the wilderness.

CHAVRUTA STUDY

1. Study the parsha of MARAH : 15:22-27. Examine its language, its ideas and content. Do you detect a clear motive in the story here?

2. Look at the first passuk. See these two midrashim on that passuk:

Midrash 1: From the Tanchuma:

“Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds.”(15:22) - Moses had to drag them away from there, against their desire. Why? When the Israelites left Egypt, Pharaoh pursued them with his massive army, with horses and chariots adorned and decorated with jewels and precious stones. When they entered the sea and God submerged and drowned them, the jewels flowed in the water and washed up on the sea shore. Israel went down to the water daily and would take the jewels. They didn’t want to leave. When Moses saw this, he forced them to depart.”

Midrash 2: Tanchuma

“Rabbi Eliezer Hamodai said: What is the meaning of the phrase “Then Moses caused them to set out”? - The moment he told them to journey, they did not ask “Where are we going?”, “Maybe this is an empty forsaken desert?”. Rather they arose and traveled with immediacy, reliant on faith. The prophet Jeremiah said about this generation; “Go and cry out in the ears of all Jerusalem ‘ So says the Lord: I remember your virtue, the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed Me into the wilderness, in a land that was not sown’(Jer 2:2)”

What textual difficulty are both these midrashim relating to?

Which reading is more correct?

2. Look at the story at Marah:

What is the “test” (v.25)?

What are the mitzvot that God taught Am Yisrael? See Rashi(v,25) and compare his view with the Rashbam (ibid.)

3. See the Sephorno (v.25-26) What is the comparison between this parsha and gerut?

How does he understand passuk 27 here?

THE SHIUR SECTION:

“Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on to the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink water from Marah because it (they) were bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses saying ‘What shall we drink?’ He cried to the Lord and the Lord showed him a tree . He threw it into the water and the water became sweet. (Exodus 15:22-25)

This is the event which follows on immediately from the events of the Yam Suf - The miraculous parting and crossing of the Red Sea (or the Sea of Reeds). Only yesterday they had stared death in the face. For the entire duration of a dark and fearful night, the sea lay before them and the entire Egyptian army was camped behind them. There was nowhere to turn, no get-out, no escape. And the Egyptians, after all they have been through, would surely show no mercy. Everyone was going to be killed! They cried to Moses:

“What have you done to us, taking us out of Egypt... it is better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.” (14:11-12)

And then, the miracle occurred. The impossible happened. The sea split and the Children of Israel crossed the sea on dry land. The people looked on as their enemies, their oppressors and taskmasters drowned in a deluge of crashing waves. The enemy forces were obliterated and the Israelites saved, their very fears were drowned in their immense sense of relief and their joy. And then -

“ They had faith in God and in His servant Moses” (14:30)

They sang the jubilant “Shirat Hayam”, the song of victory - God’s victory - at the sea. They sang and celebrated; they danced.

And now, a day later, the musical instruments have been put aside, the songs have left the lips of the people and Miriam and her band of womenfolk are not dancing, they are back at work. Life has returned to a more normal rhythm. It is now that the people need to embark on an arduous, grueling journey into the desert, “the great and terrible wilderness” (Deut 8:15) with its snakes, scorpions and other assorted perils. New tests and challenges face the Children of Israel. How will the people react?

RELUCTANT DEPARTURE

The Midrash Tanchuma reads as follows:

“Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds.”(15:22) - Moses had to drag them away from there, against their desire. Why? When the Israelites left Egypt, Pharaoh pursued them with his massive army, with horses and chariots adorned and decorated with jewels and precious stones. When they entered the sea and God submerged and drowned them, the jewels flowed in the water and washed up on the sea shore. Israel went down to the water daily and would take the jewels. They didn't want to leave. When Moses saw this, he forced them to depart.”

What is this Midrash telling us? Did Pharaoh's army really decorate their horses with Jewelry? Did it all wash up on the sea shore or might it have stayed on the sea bed?

First, a word about the midrashic methodology and style. The Midrash typically reads a text with deliberate precision but tells us its commentary in the form of story or fable. The Midrash is less interested in telling us historical fact. It wants to highlight and develop a particular textual nuance and to analyse its meaning. Midrash in its close scrutiny of the Biblical language frequently highlights points that other commentators pass over.

Here, the Midrash is sensitive to the unusual phrase used by the Torah to describe Israel's departure from the Reed Sea. This phrase would indicate a certain reluctance on the part of the people, and a coercive action on the part of Moses - “Then MOSES CAUSED Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds.” To what does the Midrash attribute Israel's unwillingness to leave the sea? Apparently, it is an attachment to the jewels of Egypt; let us interpret this metaphorically – the material luxuries of Egypt. The people will not begin their march into the future and the fulfillment of their national destiny. And why? Because they want to collect a few more jewels. The promises of the future: of a land flowing with milk and honey, of the giving of the Torah, of ancestral pledges fulfilled, fade into the background. All that occupies the minds of the people is the here and now. The wealth of Egypt lies before them.

THE FLESHPOTS OF EGYPT

In truth the Midrash here connects with a theme that runs through our entire Parsha and appears too later on in Torah. This theme is the Israelite nostalgia for Egypt and a certain aura of comfort that Egypt conjures up in their minds. It would seem that the Children of Israel remember Egypt with rose tinted spectacles. They do not remember it as the land of oppression, suffering and hardship. They seem to forget quickly the brick quotas, the decrees that “every male child that is born shall be thrown into the river”. Instead, this is what they recall of the Egypt experience in comparison with their “free” lives. They say,

“If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in Egypt when we sat by the flesh-pots, when we ate our fill of bread! For you have brought us out into this wilderness to starve..” (16:3 and in Bamidbar-Numbers 11:4-6)

Fleishpots? Eating their fill of bread? This request is a reflection of the way they view their previous lives in Egypt. In their eyes it seems that they had it so good. Every time they run into trouble in the wilderness, if there is a shortage of food or water, they cry out with the same catchphrase a chant which they repeated on every occasion:

“Why did you bring us out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our livestock...?” (17:3 and see also 14:11-12 and in Bamidbar-Numbers 14:2-4, 21:5)

Let us examine the problem. A yearning for Egypt. An attraction to the material abundance of Egypt. The Children of Israel seem unable to see beyond the jewels on the sea shore; they cannot see beyond their immediate needs. Where is the vision, the hope the sense of history? Where is the ability to tolerate hardship in the face of a larger dream?

SLAVE MENTALITY

Maybe we can suggest that this Midrash taps into an important psychological phenomenon - the psychology of the slave.

The Israelites are used to living as slaves. Slaves are provided with rations so that they can work. The Egyptians made sure that they had food. What do the Israelites remember? They remember only that they were cared for there and provided for. The fact that they were getting slave rations, is for some reason overlooked. But when they find themselves hungry with no means of provision, they are immediately lost. Like a child without their mother, they simply cry. A simple need unfulfilled is a crisis for the slave.

It would seem that the mind of the slave is limited to these narrow horizons of immediate material fulfillment. The slave lives for the moment. He does not have the luxury of planning the future; his role is simply to survive the present. The hallmarks of the slave generation which is leaving Egypt can be felt throughout the Parsha. God does not lead the Israelites “by way of the Land of the Pelsitim although it was nearer for God said, ‘If they encounter war, the people may have a change of heart and return to Egypt’”. (13:17-18) The people still see Egypt as a protective secure environment. They need the security, they need its order and comforting predictability. Egypt is an environment where decisions are made for them, where they know the rules of life. In the outside world, they are lacking in confidence.

They are slaves in other senses too. The Ibn Ezra (14:13) asks; why did the Israelites not fight the Egyptians when they were attacked at the Red Sea. After all, the Israelites numbered six hundred thousand fighting men, a considerable force. He answers:

“The Egyptians were masters to the Israelites. This exodus generation was accustomed from the youngest age to suffer under the yoke of Egyptian oppression. Their spirit was broken. How could they stand up and fight their masters ... after all they were inexperienced in the art of war....”

The result of this slave mentality will be a certain instability within the national mood of the people. They are fickle. One moment they can be uplifted by the soaring euphoria of the

miracle at the Red Sea and the next minute, all has been forgotten; they might as well be back in Egypt. When crisis hits, the people panic and all the theological truths disappear as if into thin air.

RUNNING ON FAITH

It would be unfair if we did not mention the other view in the Midrash Tanchuma:

“Rabbi Eliezer Hamodai said: What is the meaning of the phrase “Then Moses caused them to set out”? - The moment he told them to journey, they did not ask “Where are we going?”, “Maybe this is an empty forsaken desert?”. Rather they arose and traveled with immediacy, reliant on faith. The prophet Jeremiah said about this generation; “Go and cry out in the ears of all Jerusalem ‘ So says the Lord: I remember your virtue, the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed Me into the wilderness, in a land that was not sown’(Jer 2:2)”

This view, diametrically opposed to the first, pictures the Children of Israel fueled by Divine inspiration. How can Moses “cause” a people to travel? We don’t hear a complaint! Not a murmur! (in direct contrast to the next two chapters which are full of complaint and unrest). Apparently, there is an atmosphere of reliance and faith in God that allows Moses to “cause” the camp to travel by simply issuing the order; nothing else is necessary. This is the people of faith, who follow their God blindly into a barren wilderness, propelled by their dedication to Him, the devotion of a young bride following her husband. After all, in the aftermath of the crossing of the Red Sea, who would doubt God? Who would not have complete confidence that He would provide for them no matter what!

Two very different readings of a single verse, but they both reflect contradictory but very real and deep currents, ideas and truths that are relevant to Israel then, and now.

MARAH

“Then Moses caused Israel to set out from the Sea of Reeds. They went on to the wilderness of Shur; they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water. They came to Marah, but they could not drink water from Marah because it (they) were bitter; that is why it was named Marah. And the people grumbled against Moses saying ‘What shall we drink?’ He cried to the Lord and the Lord showed him a tree . He threw it into the water and the water became sweet. There he set for them statute and judgment and there he put them to the test. He said ‘If you listen well to the voice of the Lord your God, doing what is upright in his sight, giving ear to his commandments and keeping all his laws, then I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians for I the Lord am your healer.” (Exodus 15:22-26)

A strange story. A thirsty nation, bitter waters, a “magic” tree, statutes and judgments, the diseases of Egypt; what is

happening here?

This is the first time that the people “grumble”. It would seem that they are somewhat justified in their complaint! They have been traveling for three days in the desert. We can be sure that any water supplies that they brought with them have been consumed. Can we expect them to be silent? Not even to put in a request?

Interestingly enough, we see no anger here, not on the part of Moses nor from God. It would appear that God accepts the request as legitimate and provides a solution to the water shortage. But this doesn’t really get to the bottom of the issue because this episode seems to have a second less obvious theme. This is the teaching of “statute and commandment” and the promises about listening to God and obeying his command. How does the water story and this emphasis on God’s law and the Children of Israel’s acceptance of it, become a single story?

The RASHBAM (15:25) puts it in the following way:

“There he set for them statute and judgment and there he put them to the test : There at Marah, through the fabrication of a test - God made them thirst for water and then ‘healed’ the water for them - He began to demonstrate to them, that if they will keep the statutes and judgments which He will teach, He will provide their needs.”

The Rashbam notes an important side of this event. It is all a set-up by God! He lead them on a route on which there would be no water, he guided them to the bitter “marah” waters and then he “healed” the waters making them fit for human consumption. Why is God doing this? The Rashbam explains that God is teaching the Jewish people the most basic of lessons. That the national fortune of this people is tied up with their adherence to the word of God. This lesson is one of the central themes of the Bible. God shows them how He can provide for their basic necessities and at the same time, begins to talk about Torah and a new way of life. The verse tells us that they were taught “Statute and judgments”. According to RASHI, it was here that God presented Israel with their first commandments.

WATER AND TORAH

A famous rabbinic saying states that “words of torah are compared to water” . It is interesting that this theme fits in very closely with this narrative. This event - the thirsting for water” - happens after three days in the wilderness; “ ... they traveled three days in the wilderness and found no water”. What SHOULD have happened on the third day in the wilderness? Moses himself has told us. It is in the master plan. Every time Moses goes to Pharaoh he tells him that

“We want to go three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to our God” (see 8:23 and other variations- 3:18, 5:3, 7:16, 10:11, 10:26)

The end of the three day journey was meant to herald a religious ceremony! And what religious ceremony could be more central than the giving of the Torah? The Midrash, by way of a parable, suggests that the people were looking for “water” ie. Torah, at the end of these three days. It gives this as the reason why the Torah is read publicly thrice weekly

(Monday, Thursday and Shabbat), so that “the people should not go three days without words of Torah” (Tanchuma #19). Other elements of the story are reminiscent of a Torah theme. The word “*vayoreihu*” - God showed him (the tree) - is an unusual form containing the root of the word “torah”. The imagery of the tree sweetening the water reminds us of the verse (referring to Torah) “It is a tree of life to those who grasp it.” (Proverbs 3:18). Spiritual sustenance is as essential to a person as the physical and this slave nation lacked both. God aims to provide food for the body and for the soul.

The Midrash has found an important parallel, for this parsha is about finding Torah as much as it is about finding water. After severing the ties with Egypt, God takes them through the wilderness, building up a relationship with them. His aim, through a series of events is to teach them the Torah is the source of life; it is synonymous with it.

MANNA

The next story too; the Manna, repeats this theme. The people get hungry, after all they have not had an opportunity to restock for a month. God provides them with daily bread - the manna - but also begins to initiate them into the laws of the Sabbath and into an environment where they realize that God’s rules are for the best interests of the nation. Again, we see God drawing a parallel between physical sustenance and spiritual teaching.

The process which we see unfolding here, is in essence the gradual process of preparing for the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai. For the people to accept its terms, they have to understand a little of its content and essential ideas. It is this introduction, to Shabbat, to “statutes and judgments” which helps them to taste a sample of what is to come.

THE ROCK AT MOUNT SINAI

This brings us to the third story. Moses hits the Rock to provide the people with food. Does this story bring the people nearer to Torah? God provides the people with water, but he teaches them no Torah here. So how does this fit the pattern?

“God said to Moshe: Pass before the people, take with you some of the Elders of Israel and the staff with which you struck the Nile river, and set out. I will be standing on the Rock at Horeb. Strike the Rock and the water will burst forth and the people will drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the Elders of Israel.” (17:5-6)

Where does Moshe strike the rock? From where does the water flow? From Mount Horeb, otherwise known as Mount Sinai! This episode does not connect them to a particular mitzva or law. Rather, it connects them to the SOURCE OF ALL LAW!

Imagine the Israelites, parched in the wilderness. There is no water. They protest to Moshe. He then takes his staff and the leaders and walks out of the camp. Some hours later, the people are overjoyed as they see the wadi adjacent to their encampment filled with flowing water. They drink their fill, feed their children and animals, they wash themselves and launder their clothes. They are elated.

But then imagine as they take the next leg of their trek - from

Refidim to Horeb, to Sinai. They follow this life-giving wadi, to the water source itself! At the source of the spring, at the waters' origin, they receive the Torah, their source of spiritual sustenance. Once again the physical mirrors the spiritual. They work in tandem. God, by providing Israel’s physical needs, demonstrates they he is a worthy protector, a parent-figure, who cares, who hears the nations needs. He is a God of life. And it is precisely through the material things that God creates a connection with the people. Only after that does he progress to the spiritual covenant of Sinai.

CONCLUSION

The Mechilta puts it in the following way:

“God did not bring the people to Israel on the direct route. Instead he took them through the desert. God said ‘ If I bring them to the Land of Israel now, everyone will immediately involve themselves with their field or vineyard and they will pay no attention to Torah! Instead, I will take them through the wilderness. They will eat the manna and drink water from the miraculous well (that God provided by hitting the rock 17:5) and the Torah will become absorbed within their body.”

This parsha is about a transformation of a nation. They sever their dependence on Pharaoh at the Red Sea and now they begin learning a whole new system of faith and reliance. They undergo an educational process. God initiates them into the realization that Torah is their food and water. It is these lessons that they will celebrate in and struggle with throughout the course of their history.

Shabbat shalom