

PARASHAT CHUKAT

Parashat Chukat – A Watershed in Sefer Bamidbar

By Rav Elchanan Samet

A. ABARBANEL'S APPROACH TO DIVIDING SEFER BAMIDBAR

There are two basic approaches to dividing Sefer Bamidbar, each of which regards parashat Chukat as the place of division. The first approach we shall examine is that of Don Yitzchak Abarbanel, who writes in the introduction to his commentary to Sefer Bamidbar:

"The ten sedarim (of Sefer Bamidbar) can be divided into two sections. The first part consists of the first five sedarim, narrating all the trials and tribulations of their desert wanderings (Bamidbar-Korach). And the second part, consisting of the remaining five sedarim, recounts what happened to them in the wars they encountered when they reached inhabited areas (Chukat-Masei)".(

It would seem that the Abarbanel means that the second part of the Sefer starts at the beginning of parashat Chukat, immediately after the command concerning the red heifer:

"And Bnei Yisrael – the whole congregation – came to the wilderness of Tzin in the first month, and the nation dwelled in Kadesh, and Miriam died there and was buried there."
(20:1(

The commentators (Ibn Ezra, Rashbam and others) maintain that this occurred at the beginning of the fortieth year after the exodus. If this is so, we need to consider the Torah's long silence regarding the history of the generation that left Egypt - after the sin of the spies, we hear almost nothing for a period of some 37 years. The sin of the spies took place in the middle of the second year after the exodus, and immediately thereafter, the

punishment of desert wanderings for forty years came into effect. What does the Torah tell us of this period? It describes only one incident – the rebellion of Korach and his followers. The Ramban and other commentators believe that Korach's rebellion took place immediately after the sin of the spies, while they were in Kadesh Barnea, for "then the spirit of the nation was bitter... and so at that time Korach found the opportunity to protest against his (Moshe's) actions, believing that the nation would listen to him".

If this is the case, then the episode of Korach, too, belongs to the second year after the exodus. Following this there is a long silence during the transition from parashat Korach to parashat Chukat. We reach 20:1 having passed over a huge "black hole" in the continuity of the Torah's narrative. Following this narrative gap, we are now presented with a new situation: the generation of those who left Egypt has now disappeared, and a new, young generation – for the most part born in the desert and unfamiliar with the experience of slavery – now occupies center-stage.

In between the conclusion of the story of the generation that left Egypt in parashat Korach and the beginning of the story of the second generation in our parasha, we find the command regarding the red heifer (chapter 19), separating the two generations. This mitzva would seem to belong in the laws of purity and impurity found in Sefer Vayikra (chapters 11-15). Its borderline position here signifies the conclusion of the decree passed on the generation that left Egypt in the wake of the sin of the spies (14:29): "In this desert your corpses will fall..." With the conclusion of this process of distinction between the two generations, we reach the stage of purification from the impurity of death, in preparation for the new and pure life that awaits the generation about to enter the land of Canaan.

Hence, this division of Sefer Bamidbar has a DEMOGRAPHIC-historical basis.

B. HARTOUM'S APPROACH

In his introduction to Sefer Bamidbar, the commentator A.S. Hartoum writes:

"This Sefer includes the story of what happened to Bnei Yisrael from the first day of the second month after leaving Egypt until some time after Aharon's death, on the first of the fifth month of the fortieth year, and the laws given during that period. It can be divided into three parts:

a. The wilderness of Sinai (1:1-10:10); b. On the way from the wilderness of Sinai to the plains of Moav (10:11-22:1); c. The plains of Moav (22:2-36:13)."

The verse which, in the view of this commentator, serves to divide the first two parts of this Sefer from the third is the LAST verse of parashat Chukat (22:1:(

"And Bnei Yisrael traveled and they encamped in the plains of Moav on the far side of the Jordan, by Jericho".

In the plains of Moav Bnei Yisrael reached the final encampment of their journey from Egypt to the borders of Canaan. Here they camped for a few months, at the end of which they would cross the Jordan and begin the conquest of the land, as recounted in Sefer Yehoshua. During their encampment in the plains of Moav all the events still to be narrated took place: the story of Balak and Bilam, the sin of Ba'al Pe'or and its consequences, the national census, the war against Midian and some other events, and it was here that Moshe made his great speech comprising Sefer Devarim, starting on Rosh Chodesh Shevat and lasting until his death on the seventh of Adar.

According to this division, we find that the story of Bnei Yisrael's wandering in the desert is recounted up until the end of parashat Chukat. From parashat Balak until the end of Sefer Devarim we find a description of the events that took place at their final encampment, at the point of their departure for the conquest of the land – in the plains of Moav on the far side of the Jordan, facing Jericho.

This division, then, is based on a GEOGRAPHICAL-historical perspective.

C. A YEAR OF RESTLESSNESS

The events described in parashat Chukat itself should be understood as a series of events that arise from a mismatch of these two verses, which the commentators use to divide the Sefer, and from the tension that unavoidably accompanies this mismatch. Let us explain.

With the disappearance of the generation that left Egypt and the entry of the second generation onto center-stage, at the beginning of the fortieth year (and the beginning of parashat Chukat), everyone expected an end to the wandering and a gathering at the border point in preparation for the conquest of the land. The Divine plan was that the previous entry into the land via the mountains of the Negev (i.e., a south-north course), which had produced such disastrous results in the previous generation, should not repeat itself. Rather, the nation was to enter the land from the east, via the plains of Moav, north of the Dead Sea. Upon reaching Kadesh, a city on the edge of the border of Edom, at the

beginning of the fortieth year, Moshe sends messengers to the king of Edom, asking permission to cross his land along the shortest route to the plains of Moav which lie on the banks of the Jordan, facing Jericho. The king of Edom's refusal to allow Bnei Yisrael to pass through his land on the highway causes the nation to steer away from him and turn from Kadesh and Hor Ha-Har southwards, the way they came, to the Red Sea road, in order to walk around the south and east of Edom.

Now they have to continue their wanderings for a few more months in the great eastern wilderness that lies to the east of the kingdoms of Edom and Moav, and they will reach the plains of Moav only during the winter months of that year. The entry into the land will begin only in Nissan, after the conclusion of the fortieth year. This year will therefore mostly be spent wandering in arid regions, like all the years of wandering that have preceded it. The nation, which saw the promised land so close to being within their reach, now has distance itself from the land, dealing once again with problems of water and other such desert considerations. This is highly reminiscent of what took place at the sin of the spies, when their fathers were commanded at (another) Kadesh: "Tomorrow turn and journey into the desert, on the Red Sea road" (14:25). It is not surprising, then, that at this point we are told, "and the soul of the nation was discouraged because of the journey" (21:4).

The crises of the fortieth year are therefore a result of the continued wanderings of the second generation and from their suffering because of their wish to finally enter the promised land. Therefore, all of the actions of this generation – both positive and negative – should be compared with those of the first generation, so as to demonstrate the superiority of the new generation. Even when they sin they appear quite different from their fathers. They long not for Egypt, but for Canaan. This generation despises desert life because they wish to live a natural life in their land. They are quite prepared to fight in order to enter the land and to conquer it, and their test lies in showing restraint towards those nations surrounding them, against whom they may not wage war (Devarim 2).

This is the key to the study of parashat Chukat. Let us now make some observations concerning the various events described in it.

D. "I SENT BEFORE YOU MOSHE, AHARON AND MIRIAM" (MIKHA 6:4)

The first events of the fortieth year described in the text are the following:

- i. The death of Miriam in Kadesh (20:1)
- ii. The punishment of Moshe and Aharon at Mei Meriva (20:12) – "You shall not bring this congregation to the land which I have given them".

iii. The death of Aharon at Hor Ha-har as the start of the punishment decreed at Mei Meriva (20:22-29.)

It is difficult not to perceive a connection between these events: all deal with the disappearance of the leadership associated with the previous generation, the leadership of the three children of Amram – Moshe, Aharon and Miriam.

The death of two of them is described in our parasha: Miriam in the first month of the fortieth year, and Aharon in the fifth month. Moshe's death is decreed in our parasha, but it takes place only at the end of the fortieth year, in the eleventh month, representing the last event described in the Torah.

Why did these three personalities continue to lead the people into the fortieth year, while their generation has disappeared? This, too, reveals the dual nature of this year – it is a time of transition between those events associated with the exodus from Egypt and wandering in the desert and those associated with the conquest of the land and its inheritance. From the DEMOGRAPHIC perspective this year belongs to the generation of the conquerors and inheritors of Eretz Canaan, but from a GEOGRAPHICAL perspective the year still holds more wandering in the vast and terrible wilderness, and the wanderers – like their fathers – still need miraculous leadership in order to ensure their continued survival there.

The fortieth year may therefore be described as one of transition, with a gradual process of a wandering nation becoming a war-faring, conquering, and settling one. Although at the beginning of the year it becomes clear that the wanderings are not yet over and that Bnei Yisrael will have to circumvent Edom and Moav, journeying again through barren wilderness for another half a year, when they reach the plains of Moav in the second half of the year it becomes clear to them that they are already engaged in a war of conquest, and even in the first stages of settlement of those areas which they have conquered.

Since the fortieth year represents a gradual transition from the miraculous existence that characterized the desert period to a natural existence worthy of a nation entering its land, we see a corresponding gradual disappearance of the previous leadership. At the beginning of the year Miriam dies, in the middle – Aharon, and at the end of the year we read of the death of the leader who brought his nation to the border of the land and witnessed the initial wars and victories, but was not permitted to see the full realization of the vision.

The great merit of these leaders ensured that they did not die prior to the fortieth year, and also that they were not included amongst those included in the decree of death following the sin of the spies who despised the land. The merit of Israel ensured that their previous leaders did not disappear before the circumstances were right for the great change that was to take place in their lives.

E. THE FINAL TWO COMPLAINTS IN THE DESERT

Parashat Chukat describes the last two complaints of Bnei Yisrael in the desert, concluding the list of complaints that began just after the exodus. The first complaint in our parasha is the one that was raised in Kadesh following Miriam's death because "there was no water for the congregation." This event is reminiscent of what took place at the beginning of the nation's journey, when they reached Refidim and thirsted for water, as described in parashat Beshalach (Shemot 17:1-7). Even the place names are similar: "Masa and Meriva" in Sefer Shemot corresponding to "Mei Meriva" in our parasha, and there are also several linguistic parallels between the two complaints.

The second complaint of our parasha occurs during the journey from Hor Ha-har around Edom:

..."and the spirit of the nation was discouraged because of the journey. And the nation spoke against God and against Moshe: **WHY DID YOU BRING US UP OUT OF EGYPT to die in the desert, for there is no bread and no water, AND OUR SOUL LOATHES THIS MISERABLE BREAD.**" (21:4-5)

This complaint, too, echoes a previous one related to despising the manna – the complaint of those who desired meat, described in parashat Beha'alotekha:

..."Who will feed us meat? ...We remember the fish which we ate in Egypt for free... now our soul is dried up, there is nothing except for this manna before our eyes." (11:4-6)

It would seem that nothing has changed in the course of all these years, and the complaint that was repeated so many times by the previous generation – "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt?" – appears twice more in the words of the younger generation. Has nothing at all changed?

Let us begin by examining the second complaint in our parasha. Although it is true that the nation despises the manna, like their forefathers who craved meat, and although they repeat the same old line ("Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to die in the desert?") and this is again considered sinful and they are punished with the snakes, nevertheless there is an enormous difference between this scenario and the one described in parashat Beha'alotekha. The first generation despised the manna during the second year after the exodus, because they longed to return to Egypt, remembering fondly the meat and fish and vegetables they ate there. The second generation despises the "miserable bread" that descends miraculously from heaven, because "their soul is discouraged because of the journey." They believed that they were about to enter the land, and now they have to backtrack and circumvent the land of Edom, once again wandering in the desert and fed by miracles.

The new generation does not long for Egypt – indeed, they have no memories of Egypt; most of them were never there. Rather, they are eager to enter Canaan. Their problem is not that they miss the meat and fish and vegetables of Egypt, but rather that "there is no bread, nor any water." They desire a natural, terrestrial existence, one that is not dependent on miracles. They want water that comes down from heaven and bread that grows from the earth, not the opposite, as is the case in the desert.

Their words are indeed sinful, but they reveal the progress that has been made since the previous generation. Their sin arises from their longing to live in their promised land. We may also say in their defense that the frustration of once again having to distance themselves from the land and return to the wilderness causes "their soul to be discouraged," and so they speak as they do.

Let us now turn our attention to the nation's complaint at Mei Meriva. The corresponding complaint at Masa and Meriva, of the nation that had left Egypt, was clear and simple: "Why then have you brought us up out of Egypt to kill us and our children and our flocks with thirst?" There is a clear expression here – one of many during the time of that generation – of the fact that when faced with any difficulty there is an immediate display of their wish "to be enslaved with hard labor to those who hate them, rather than being the nation of God, like a son who serves his father" (Ramban, 20:7). But a close examination of the language used by the next generation at Mei Meriva reveals that the crux of their complaint is not about coming out of Egypt, but rather about their continued stay in "this desert":

"And WHY DID YOU BRING God's congregation TO THIS DESERT to die there, we and our flocks, and why did you bring us up out of Egypt TO BRING US TO THIS EVIL PLACE; not a place of seed or figs or grapes or pomegranates, and there is no water to drink".

"This desert," "this evil place" – these are presented not in contrast with Egypt (as would have been the case in the previous generation), but rather in contrast with the Land of Canaan – the land described by Moshe in terms that contrast completely with their complaint about the desert:

..."a good land, a land with streams of water, of fountains and deep springs that burst forth from valleys and hills; a land of wheat and barley and grapes and figs and pomegranates; a land of olive oil and date honey." (Devarim 8:7-9)

Attention should be paid to what it is that they feel they lack in the desert: "seed" (wheat and barley), "figs and grapes and pomegranates" – precisely the foods for which Eretz Canaan is praised, "and there is no water to drink" – the exact opposite of the beginning of Moshe's description of the land.

Why does the nation not mention the two last types of food for which the land is praised – "olive oil and date honey?" It would seem that the reason is because oil and honey are luxuries which one could live without if necessary. This implies that they are not complaining over a lack of luxury, but rather over a lack of the basic essentials for survival: water, bread and fruits. (Again in the second complaint, they declare that "there is no bread, nor is there water".

Let us summarize as follows: upon reaching Kadesh at the beginning of the fortieth year, with the younger generation now standing close to the border of the land, ready to inherit it, and with the death of Miriam – one of the leaders of the previous generation, there is eager expectation on the part of the new generation that they will enter the land immediately. But once again they face a familiar problem: "There was no water for the congregation" – as was the case at the beginning of their journey, shortly after their fathers left Egypt.

This crisis, so characteristic of desert wanderings, causes great frustration: are their desert journeys not over? Has the time for their entry into the land not yet arrived? Has the generation of those who left Egypt not already died out, the sin of the spies forgiven? They, the children, are now so close to the land. In any situation of prolonged waiting and expectation, the last part is harder than any time that precedes it. Here, too, the fortieth year is harder for this generation to bear than all of the previous 39 years. And so they lose patience for continued journeying in the desert, and we hear them complaining over the fact that the purpose of the exodus has not been fulfilled; they are still in "this evil place" – the complete opposite of the good land which they so long for.

God understands them, and tries to ease their psychological distress in His great mercy. Moshe and Aharon do not understand them, since they do not belong to this generation and its experiences. They see this generation as the direct continuation of the previous one and they therefore fail to understand God's mercy towards them and His support for these "rebels." It becomes apparent, therefore, that Moshe and Aharon are no longer able to continue leading this generation.

)Translated by Kaeren Fish(