

The War against Amalek

Parashat Beshalach

- Rav Menachem Leibtag

The Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash

Bnei Yisrael gloriously depart Egypt, expecting a short journey to a Land flowing with milk and honey (see 3:17). To their surprise, they encounter instead situations of frightening war, terrible hunger, and life-threatening thirst. Are Bnei Yisrael expected not to complain; to passively accept this fate, to wait patiently for God's salvation? Is God simply 'testing' their patience? To answer these questions, this week's shiur discusses the significance of the events that transpire from the time of the Exodus until Bnei Yisrael arrive at Har Sinai.

BACKGROUND / REVIEW According to God's prophecy to Moshe Rabeinu at the burning bush (3:8,17), Bnei Yisrael should have travelled directly from Egypt to Eretz Canaan, with a stop over at Har Chorev [= Har Sinai] to offer korbanot of thanksgiving to God. Reality, however, unfolds quite differently. Instead of travelling directly into the desert, God re-routes their journey towards Yam Suf (the Red Sea). After crossing the Red Sea, Bnei Yisrael do travel the 'three day journey' into the desert, however, they arrive at Mara - NOT at Har Sinai. Later, during their five week journey from Mara to Har Sinai, they run out of food at Midbar Sin, they run out of water at Rfidim, and they engage in battle with Amalek. Why does the redemption not proceed as originally planned? Are the events that transpire incidental, or are they part of some Divine plan?

To appreciate the significance of these events, we must keep in mind the ultimate goal of Yetziat Mitzraim, i.e. the fulfillment of God's covenant with the Avot. Recall the intention of that covenant - Bnei Yisrael are to inherit the Promised Land and become God's model Nation, leading all mankind toward a moral, theocentric existence. The achievement of this goal requires not only that God redeem His people from Egypt, but also that Bnei Yisrael become an active covenantal partner. This process, which begins

with Yetziat Mitzraim, entails five critical stages: 1) Freedom from slavery in Egypt 2) Accepting God, i.e. the willingness to obey Him. 3) Receiving His Laws (Matan Torah) 4) Conquering the Promised Land 5) Establishing a Nation in that land, based on God's Laws.

According to the original plan, Bnei Yisrael should have accepted God (stage 2) BEFORE the Exodus (stage 1). Had they done so, they could have proceeded directly from Egypt to Har Chorev to receive the Torah (stage 3). However, as we explained in our last two shiurim, Bnei Yisrael do not answer God's original call to perform "teshuva" prior to their redemption (see Shmot 6:6-9 & Ezekiel 20:5-9). Although offering the "korban Pesach" makes them worthy enough to survive "makkat bchorot" (the tenth Plague), they are far from ready for Matan Torah. That next stage can not ensue before the people refine their relationship with God. Owing to this unfortunate circumstance, God finds it necessary to 'change His plan'.

THE NEW PLAN The following table lists the key events that take place during this 'round about' journey to Har Sinai:

LOCATION EVENT 1) Yam Suf (14:11) Am Yisrael is **ATTACKED** by the Mitzrim; 2) Mara (15:24) the **WATER** is bitter; 3) Midbar Sin (15:2) there is no **FOOD** to eat; 4) Rfidim (17:3) there is no **WATER** to drink; 5) Rfidim II (17:8) Am Yisrael is **ATTACKED** by Amalek. [See further Iyun Section for an explanation of the chiastic structure: war-water-food-water-war.]

Despite the distinctive nature of each of these events, they all share a common purpose, i.e. each incident helps prepare Bnei Yisrael for Matan Torah. In other words, God **INTENTIONALLY INITIATES** these events in order to catalyze Bnei Yisrael's spiritual growth, to 'train' them to become His Nation!

To appreciate the specific purpose of each individual event, we must consider the reason why in the first place Bnei Yisrael did not perform proper "teshuva".

BREAKING SLAVE MENTALITY It is extremely difficult for a slave, even after he has gained his freedom, to act or think like a free man. As we explained in Parshat Va'eyra,

Bnei Yisrael do not listen to God's original call because of their 'crushed spirits and hard labor'- "v'LO SHAMU el Moshe, mikotzer RUACH u'mAVODAH KASHA" - (6:9). The strain of their prolonged bondage and the fatigue of their daily routine had deprived them of all spirituality. Most probably, their highest aspirations had been a good meal and a little rest.

It was because of their bondage, that Bnei Yisrael had grown instinctively dependent on their masters - the Egyptians. Therefore, before they can accept His laws at Matan Torah, it is necessary to transform their instinctive physical dependence on Egypt to a cognitive spiritual dependence on God. Bnei Yisrael must rebuild their national character. We all know how difficult it is for a person to change his character, how much more so for an entire nation to do so. A change of character can usually take place in one of two ways. On one hand, a traumatic experience will usually facilitate a sudden change. Otherwise, daily routine can slowly change instinctive behavior. [e.g. "k'va i'tim la'torah"!] We will see that God employs both approaches in His attempt to bring about a serious improvement in the national character of Am Yisrael. 1) KRIYAT YAM SUF - SPLITTING OLD TIES Kriyat Yam Suf (the splitting of the Red Sea) can be understood as a traumatic experience that helps Bnei Yisrael break their instinctive dependence on Mitzraim. At Kriyat Yam Suf, God inflicts His final punishment upon Pharaoh and his army (14:4). Even though this outcome could have been achieved during "makkat bchorot", it appears that God wanted Bnei Yisrael to witness this final punishment while they themselves are in a situation of peril.

Bnei Yisrael's spontaneous complaint when confronted by the Egyptian army echoes this instinctive dependence on Mitzraim: "... What have you done to us taking us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing WE TOLD YOU IN EGYPT: Let us be and WE WILL SERVE THE EGYPTIANS, for it is better for us to serve the Egyptians than die in the desert" (14:11-12)

This complaint reflects a complacency about their servitude to the Egyptians, the same attitude which caused them not to repent. Sure, they do not object to a little freedom, but not at the price of enduring the perils of traveling through the desert.

[Note: see Ibn Ezra's explanation (14:13) why Bnei Yisrael did not even consider encountering the Egyptians in battle.]

God's response not only calms their fear, but also teaches them that they must break this instinctive dependence: "Do not fear, stand upright and watch God's salvation... for the manner in which you see Mitzraim today - you will NEVER SEE THEM AGAIN" ["LO TOSIFU li'rotam od ad olam".] (14:13)

Although God's reassurance appears to be a PROMISE, Chazal interpret this statement as a COMMANDMENT! [See Ramban] God FORBIDS Bnei Yisrael to continue with this attitude of dependence, i.e. they must resist their instinctive reliance on their former masters. Thus, Chazal interpret this pasuk as follows: "In this manner by which you look at Mitzraim today -DO NOT LOOK AT THEM THIS WAY EVER AGAIN." (14:13)

God is NOT promising His nation that they will never face an Egyptian army again: rather He is COMMANDING them to NEVER again look to Egypt for their salvation.

This interpretation of "Lo tosifu li'rotam" finds support in a parallel pasuk in Sefer Dvarim. In the "Tochacha" (28:1-69), God warns Bnei Yisrael that should they disobey Him, they will be exiled and sold into slavery (see Dvarim 28:62-67 / note "ki lo shamata b'kol Hashem..."). Their predicament will be so bad, the Torah warns, that they will actualHOPE that someone will PURCHASE THEM AS SLAVES. To express this point, the Torah employs the same phrase used at Kriyat Yam Suf: "And God will return you to Egypt in ships, in the manner that I told you: 'LO TOSIF OD LI'ROTA" - [Do not look at them this way again] and you will offer yourselves to your enemies for sale as slaves and maidservants, but no one will purchase you" (28:68). [See also Dvarim 17:16!]

[The word "ba'derech" - in the manner - should not be understood as a description of the ship route to Egypt (as in the JPS translation), rather as a description of Am Yisrael's predicament when they will be exiled to Egypt in those ships.]

In other words, the last stage of the "tochacha" ironically returns Am Yisrael to the same state they were in when they left Egypt- a state of yearning for total dependence on their human masters, in Egypt!

Based on this understanding of "Lo Tosifu ...", we find the primary purpose of Kriyat Yam Suf: God orchestrates a situation that encourages Bnei Yisrael to break their instinctive dependence on Egypt. God's plan appears to succeed. Upon seeing the drowning of the Egyptians in the sea, Bnei Yisrael conclude: "...and Yisrael recognized His great Hand.. and the people FEARED GOD and BELIEVED in God and Moshe His servant." (14:30-31)

Instinctively, Bnei Yisrael respond in a song of praise to God: "Az ya'shir Moshe u'bnei Yisrael..." (15:1)

2) MARA - A DESERT SEMINAR Crossing the Red Sea makes it possible to commence the 'three day journey' into the desert. However, instead of arriving at Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael travel to Mara, a site where the water is bitter. Having severed their ties with Egypt, the time is now ripe to offer Bnei Yisrael a second chance to accept God's commandments and 'cure' their attitude problem of "V'LO SHAMMU EL MOSHE...": "An He said - iym SHMOA TISH'MAU I'kol Hashem Elokecha - Should you LISTEN to the voice of God, and do what is proper in His eyes, and listen to commandments, then the affliction that I put on the Egyptians I will not put on you, for I am God your Healer" (15:26)

[See conclusion of shiur on Parshat Va'eyra where these psukim were discussed in further detail.]

Once Bnei Yisrael agree to obey God and follow His laws, the 'bitter' water of Mara becomes drinkable. Obviously, Bnei Yisrael had become thirsty for water. However, by linking the sweetness of the water to Bnei Yisrael's willingness to obey Him and follow His laws, God teaches Bnei Yisrael an important lesson of spiritual dependence.

[The 'message' of the "eytz" which God instructs Moshe to cast into the water obviously relates back to Gan Eden, the motif of an environment that requires obedience to God. The famous "drash" of "ein mayim elah Torah", i.e. when the Torah mentions water it is actually referring to Torah, almost emerges as "pshat"! See also Mishlei 3:18 and its context ("etz chayim hi l'machazakim bah...").]

Although Bnei Yisrael pass the 'test' at Mara, are they ready to proceed to Har Sinai? Not so fast! First, they must prove that they have truly 'turned over a new leaf'. In the ideal situation at Eylim (15:27), where there is plenty of water and food, no one complains. However, when the going gets tough in Midbar Sin, they quickly revert to their stubborn ways. The short 'seminar' at Mara needed some follow up.

3) MIDBAR SIN - BASIC TRAINING After arriving in Midbar Sin the food supply runs out, setting off another round of complaints (16:2-3). Even though Bnei Yisrael have the right to ask for food, HOW they ask is inexcusable: "If only we had died by the Hand of God in Egypt, when we had plenty of meat and bread to eat. Now you have brought us out into this desert to die in famine" (16:3)

The tone of their complaint indicates that Bnei Yisrael had remained instinctively dependent on Mitzraim. When hungry, they reminisce about the 'good old days' in Egypt. The traumatic experiences were not sufficient to totally change their character. They require a daily routine that will slowly change their instinctive behavior. The manna served this very purpose. It provided a daily routine that transformed their physical dependence on Mitzraim to a physical dependence on Hashem. As explained in Sefer Dvarim: "And He tormented you and starved you, then gave you 'manna' to eat... IN ORDER TO TEACH YOU that man does not live on bread alone, rather, that man lives by whatever God commands" (Dvarim 8:3)

By allowing Bnei Yisrael to gather only enough food for one day at a time, Bnei Yisrael learn to become dependant solely on God. To emphasize this point, their food falls directly from heaven. In describing this process, The Torah uses a key word - "nisayon" (a test): "Behold I will rain down bread for you from the heaven, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion - I'maan A'NA'SENU (= "nisayon") - IN ORDER THAT I MAY TEST THEM, to see whether or not they WILL FOLLOW MY INSTRUCTIONS..." (16:4).

The word "nisayon" should not be understood simply as a test to measure the level of man's relationship with God. God already knows the heart of every individual. Rather, a Divine 'test' challenges man to rise to the level required for a relationship with God. For example, at the Akeyda, God 'tests' Avraham (Br. 22:1), not to find out IF he is worthy,

rather He tests him IN ORDER TO make him worthy. Similarly, by the manna. God is not testing Bnei Yisrael to find out IF they obey Him, He is TRAINING them in order that they LEARN TO obey Him.

4) R'FIDIM - PREPARING FOR HAR SINAI Before actually arriving at Har Sinai, Bnei Yisrael stop at Rfidim, a site WITHOUT water (17:1-3). Why does God lead them to such a location? Does He expect Bnei Yisrael to survive without water? When Bnei Yisrael cry for water at Rfidim, their complaint is not as before: that they would rather die in Egypt. In light of the fact that they might perish in the desert, Bnei Yisrael question only the purpose of Yetziat Mitzraim, but they do not express any yearning to return (17:3). Finally, at least some progress has been made. What could be the purpose of this terrible predicament? Moshe himself doesn't know how to deal with this situation. He too cries for God's assistance (17:2,4). The answer is - God WANTS Bnei Yisrael to complain! He purposely leads them to a location where there is no water. WHY?

God's scheme at Rfidim had tremendous significance. It prepares Am Yisrael for 'Matan Torah'. Instead of providing Bnei Yisrael with water at Rfidim, God instructs Moshe to gather the elders (17:5-6) and go to the rock at Har Chorev (= HAR SINAI / see 3:1,12 & Dvarim 5:2). Upon hitting the rock the water gushes out, thence flowing from Har Chorev until the camp in Rfidim! The next step is obvious - Bnei Yisrael will travel from Rfidim to set up camp at Har Sinai, their NEW SOURCE of water. [For proof that hitting the rock created a gushing river flowing down the mountain - see Dvarim 9:21]

Not only have the heavens replaced the earth as the source of bread (food), Har Sinai has replaced the Nile as the constant source of water. Natural dependence on Mitzraim has now been replaced by natural dependence on God. Thus, Har Sinai becomes a source of water for Bnei Yisrael before it becomes the source of Torah. In order to be appreciated as the source of spiritual life, it must first be identified as the source of physical life.

Again, the Torah employs the word "nisayon". At Midbar Sin, God tests (=trains) Bnei Yisrael. At Rfidim, Bnei Yisrael test (=question) God; doubting if truly He is in their midst (17:7). The events at Rfidim provide Bnei Yisrael with the proper answer. God can and will provide for them, if they are deserving.

5) THE WAR WITH AMALEK - LOOKING UP TO HAR SINAI While Bnei Yisrael begin to journey from Rfidim to Har Sinai (their new source of water), Amalek attacks the 'slow travellers' left behind at Rfidim. [See 17:8, and compare with Dvar25:18 - Note that Amalek attacks while Bnei Yisrael are travelling!] War breaks out, and God commands Moshe to instruct Yehoshua to lead Bnei Yisrael in battle. In contrast to Kriyat Yam Suf, this time Bnei Yisrael themselves do the fighting. The people must recognize that even though they are actually fighting, it is God who will bring them victory. To this end, God instructs Moshe to climb the hill and raise his staff high heavenward. What hill is Moshe standing on? Based on the juxtaposition between this narrative and "masa u'mriva", Ibn Ezra explains that Moshe is standing on Har Sinai! Just as Har Sinai has become their source of water, it now becomes a source of military salvation as well. For Yisrael to become victorious, Moshe must raise his hands (17:11) to show and teach the people that they must look to Hashem, to Har Sinai, for their salvation. [Once again, the Midrash quoted by Rashi (17:11 /see also Rosh Hashana 29:1) emerges almost as "pshat" . "v'chi yadav shel moshe osot milchama... elah bzman sh'Yisrael mistaklim klapei maaleh, um'shabdim et libum l'avihem sh'ba'shamayim...."]

FROM PHYSICAL TO SPIRITUAL - FROM PASSIVE TO ACTIVE During the six week period after the Exodus, Bnei Yisrael encounter several traumatic experiences and changes in daily routine which help transform their instinctive physical dependence on Egypt to their instinctive physical dependence on God. They also become more active in the process of their redemption. Now, they are ready to take on a spiritual challenge: to receive the Torah in order to become God's special Nation. Thematically, the events of Parshat B'shalach serve as preparation for Parshat Yitro, i.e. the covenant at Har Sinai. Because Bnei Yisrael had not been prepared for their redemption from Egypt, God had placed them in various situations of peril. This encouraged Bnei Yisrael to raise their spiritual level high enough to enable that process to continue. Should Am Yisrael today learn a lesson from that history? The sooner the better!

shabbat shalom menachem

----- FOR FURTHER IYUN A. Relate the above shiur to Chazal's understanding of the seven weeks between Pesach and Shavuot as preparation for Matan Torah.

B. Read Tehilim perek 78. Note that this perek describes most of the events that take place in Parshat B'shalach. Note also the use of "dor lo hechin libo" in pasuk 8 & 37. 1. How does this phrase "dor lo hechin libo" explain why Bnei Yisrael were never successful in achieving the proper level? 2. How does this perek enhance our understanding of the Parsha (based on the above shiur)? 3. Read pasuk 38 : "v'hu rachum y'chaper avon v'lo yashchit ..." [sounds familiar]. Based on the above shiur, this perek, and its context, explain the deeper meaning of this pasuk, and how it applies to daily life. Why do you think Chazal included it in our daily davening, shacharit and maariv?

C. Chiastic structure (as noted in the shiur) war - water - food - water - war (1) As in any chiastic structure (ABCBA), emphasis is placed on the center (C). In this case, the food, indicates that the most important process towards change is daily routine. Use this to explain why the manna was placed next to the Aron.

(2) War-> War & Sefer Yehoshua The contrast between the war at the beginning and end is also interesting. Note that at Yam Suf, the victory is miraculous and Am Yisrael is passive. ["God will fight for you, and you shall be silent "(14:14)]. By Amalek, the victory is natural and Bnei Yisrael do the fighting, Moshe's staff serves as a symbol of God's help. The next step is Matan Torah. In Sefer Yehoshua, we find a striking similarity. Yericho, is a miraculous victory, Am Yisrael is passive. The Ai, is a natural victory, Am Yisrael do the fighting. Yehoshua uses his staff in this battle as a sign (8:26) Immediately afterward, Am Yisrael goes to Har Eival to re-enact Matan Torah (8:30-35)! 1. What does tell you about the need for Am Yisrael to be 'active' in nature before receiving the Torah? 2. Why is the symbol of the staff so important. What is the danger of winning of natural victory. Was is the danger of God constantly performing miracles to save Am Yisrael.

D. "Lo tosifu" = mitzvah/ See Yerushalmi Sucah 5:1 [Ramban's shita: "al daat raboteinu - zo mitzvat lo-tasseh l'dorot"].