

PARASHAT CHUKAT

Bnei Yisrael – the New Generation

By Rav Amnon Bazak

A. "HEAR NOW, REBELS"

Let us begin our discussion of this week's parasha with the story of Moshe's sin – although this will not be the focus of the shiur. We shall not address the range of interpretations as to what exactly it was that he did wrong; rather, let us examine the background to the sin.

Chapter 20 describes a complaint by Bnei Yisrael in the fortieth year:

"And the nation quarreled with Moshe and said, If only we had died the death of our brethren before God! Why have you brought God's congregation to this desert, to die there – we and our cattle? And why did you bring us up from Egypt, to bring us to this evil place – not a place of seed, or of figs, or of grapes or pomegranates; nor is there any water to drink." (20:3-5)

This complaint would seem to contain nothing new. The preference for an early death rather than a slow death of hunger or thirst in the desert had been expressed long before, by the previous generation. For example, in the wilderness of Sin they said (Shemot 16:3), "If only we had died by God's hand in the land of Egypt, where we sat by the fleshpots, eating bread to satiety! For you have brought us out to this desert, to kill off all of this congregation by hunger!" In Refidim, they complained (ibid. 17:3), "Why, then, have you brought us up from Egypt, to kill us and our children and our flocks of thirst?"

But the reaction on the part of Moshe and Aharon here is quite different from that which we witnessed in the past. Faced with the previous complaints, Moshe always reacted verbally – sometimes with admonishment, as in the wilderness of Sin ("Moshe and Aharon said to all of Bnei Yisrael: At evening you will know that God has taken you out of the land of Egypt..." - Shemot 16:6); sometimes with a cry to God, as in Refidim ("Moshe cried out to God, saying: What shall I do with this nation? A little longer and they will stone me" – ibid. 17:4). In contrast, in our present situation – at Mei Meriva – Moshe and Aharon say nothing. Their response is recorded as follows: "Moshe and Aharon came before the congregation, to the entrance of the Ohel Mo'ed, and they fell upon their faces." This gesture is not unusual in Sefer Bamidbar, but as a sole response on the part of Moshe and Aharon, devoid of any verbal accompaniment, it appears only on one other occasion: in the wake of the report by the spies and the ensuing panic

(Bamidbar 14:5).[1] Does the complaint by Bnei Yisrael here justify the most acute reaction – as in the wake of the sin of the spies?

It would appear that this extreme reaction comes to express Moshe and Aharon's profound disappointment at the new generation. For nearly forty years, Moshe and Aharon have waited for this moment. Having witnessed the demise of the generation that left Egypt – a generation that failed and was unable to free itself from the mentality of slavery which they had internalized over generations in Egypt – Moshe and Aharon hoped that the new generation would react differently to the tribulations of the journey. Now it seemed that nothing had changed: this generation was just like the previous one. What, then, had been the purpose of forty years spent getting nowhere?

This may serve to explain Moshe and Aharon's anger following God's command, and their harsh words to Bnei Yisrael: "Hear now, rebels: Shall we bring forth water for you from this rock?!" (verse 10). Whether this alone represents Moshe's entire wrongdoing – as expressed in Tehillim (106:32-33, "They angered Him at Mei Meriva, and it was bad for Moshe because of them; for they embittered his spirit, and he spoke it with his lips")[2], or whether other transgressions were also involved, it is clear that anger was the source of his sin and its principal cause. This anger, from the perspective presented above, arose from deep disappointment at this new generation.

Now we must answer the question: how is this generation to be treated, so as not to end up in the same situation as the previous generation?

B. "WE HAVE SINNED, FOR WE HAVE SPOKEN AGAINST GOD AND AGAINST YOU"

After the episode of Mei Meriva, the new generation again finds itself in a situation that is familiar to us from the previous generation:

"They journeyed from Hor ha-Har via the Red Sea, to circumvent the land of Edom, and the nation lost its patience with the way. 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 we are fed up with this miserable bread.'" (21:4-5)

Here we encounter a new phenomenon: Moshe and Aharon offer no response. Instead, there is an immediate response by God: "God sent amongst the nation the poisonous snakes, and they bit the people and a great many people of Israel died." Then the story grows even stranger: "The nation came to Moshe and said: 'We have sinned, for we have spoken against God and against you. Pray to God that he remove the snakes from upon us.'" Moshe prays, and Bnei Yisrael are saved from the deadly snakes by means of a brass snake that he fashions. But attention should be paid to the fact that this is the first time that Bnei Yisrael recognize their sin and acknowledge it openly! This is something that never happened after earlier complaints about Moshe. What is the reason for this repentance by Bnei Yisrael taking place specifically here?

It would seem that the story of the poisonous snakes symbolizes a change in leadership style. Words of admonishment, it appears, are not sufficient; a complaint must be responded to with the proper severity: it must be punished. This harsh and unprecedented step [3] is aimed at halting the deterioration and forcing Am Yisrael to serve God out of fear, with the ultimate goal of leading them towards faith.

Indeed, following this episode, there is no further complaint that arises amongst the nation.

Hence we can understand the significance of the punishment appearing specifically in the form of snakes. The snake was meant, from the beginning of the story of the Exodus, to lead to faith deriving from fear. When Moshe appealed to God at the burning bush, expressing his doubts ("But they will not believe me and will not listen to my voice, for they will say, 'God did not appear to you,'" Shemot 4:1), God suggests that he use a snake as a way to bring the nation to believe:

"God said to him, 'What is that in your hand?'

He answered, 'A staff.'

And He said, 'Cast it to the ground.'

He cast it to the ground, and it turned into a snake, and Moshe fled from it.

God said to Moshe, 'Put forth your hand and grasp it by its tail.'

He put forth his hand and held it, and it became a staff in his hand. 'That they MAY BELIEVE that the Lord God of their fathers - the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzchak and the God of Yaakov - has appeared to you.'"

Indeed, the snake and the other signs achieved the desired result:

"He performed the signs before the eyes of the nation AND THE NATION BELIEVED, and when they heard that God had remembered Bnei Yisrael and that He had seen their suffering, they bowed and prostrated themselves." (ibid. 30-31)

Now, again, the snake is intended to guide the nation towards faith, but – in contrast to the time of the Exodus, where the miracle of the snake was a one-time event – the brass snake will remain with the new generation of Bnei Yisrael as a daily reminder of God's presence:

"Moshe fashioned a brass snake and he placed it upon a pole. And it was that anyone who had been bitten by the snake and who looked at the brass snake, would live." (Bamidbar 21:9)

Clearly, it is not ideal that faith in Am Yisrael should be based upon perpetual fear of snakes, and that their salvation should come through the symbol of a brass snake. But sometimes such a step is necessary in order to bring about a change in national behavior and sentiment. Now we must ask, to what extent did this step contribute to the faith of the new generation?

C. "THEN SANG..."

Immediately after the episode of the snakes, the Torah describes the journeying of Bnei Yisrael, leading to the "song of the well." Here we may examine another comparison between the generation that left Egypt and the generation that will enter the Land of Canaan.

The generation that left Egypt achieved the peak of their faith following the splitting of the Red Sea: "Israel saw the great actions that God had performed in Egypt, and the nation feared God and BELIEVED IN God and in His servant, Moshe" (Shemot 15:1-2). As a direct result of this lofty level of faith, Moshe and the nation break out in praise – the "song of the sea:" "Then Moshe and Bnei Yisrael SANG THIS SONG to God, saying: I shall praise God, for He has triumphed with glory..." (ibid. 15:1-2).

Correspondingly, after crossing over the Arnon river, another song is uttered. This time Bnei Yisrael sing it themselves, with no assistance and motivation from Moshe: "Then Israel SANG THIS SONG: Ascend, O well, sing to it..." (21:17). The similar language points to a comparison between the two songs – a hint that was not lost on Chazal and the commentators:

"Just as we tell of the miracles of the [splitting of the] Red Sea, so we should recount the miracles of the Arnon river, for here too there were great miracles."
(Rashi 21:14)

It should be pointed out that the content of the song of the well testifies to a partnership of action between God and man. On the one hand, the well is given to them by God – "It is the well that God referred to when he told Moshe, 'Gather the nation and I shall give them water'" (21:16). On the other hand, we find in the song that it is "a well dug by princes, delved by noblemen of the nation" (verse 18; see Ibn Ezra).

This stands in contrast to the song of the sea, which represented, in its entirety, God's battle against Egypt. It appears, then, that the new generation is destined to assume a more active role than the passive one characterizing the previous generation.

D. "AND ISRAEL SMOTE THEM BY THE SWORD"

The difference between Bnei Yisrael's behavior prior to the story of the snakes and following it stands out again later in the narrative. Following the sin of Mei Meriva, when it became apparent that the nation had still not reached the proper level, Moshe continues to act as the sole leader:

"MOSHE SENT messengers from Kadesh to the king of Edom, So say your brethren, Israel: You know all the tribulations that have met us..." (20:14).

In contrast, following the story of the snakes, when the nation has already repented and embarked on a new path, Moshe's activity is no longer required. The nation is now capable of acting on its own initiative and by its own power:

"ISRAEL SENT messengers to Sichon, king of the Emorites, saying: Let us pass through your land; we shall not turn aside to the fields and the vineyards..." (21:21-22)

The continuation of the story is completely different in these two narratives. On the border of Edom, after attempts at persuading the king proved to be of no avail, Edom came out against Bnei Yisrael, and the latter for forced to deviate from their path:

"He (the Edomite king) said: 'You shall not pass.' Then Edom came out towards (Bnei Yisrael) with many people and with a strong hand. And Edom refused to allow Israel to pass through his border, and Israel turned away from him." (20:20-21)

In contrast, when Sichon refuses a similar request, Bnei Yisrael go out to wage war against him, and deliver a great blow:

"Sichon did not allow Israel to pass through his border, and Sichon gathered all of his people and came out to Israel in the desert. And he came to Yahatz, and waged war against Israel. And Israel smote (them) by the sword and inherited his land, from Arnon up to Yabbok, to the children of Ammon." (21:23-24)

What is the reason for this difference?

The answer would seem to lie elsewhere (see Ramban). In parashat Devarim, in the midst of Moshe's historical speech, he tells the nation:

"You are crossing the border of your brethren, the children of Esav, who dwell in Se'ir; they shall be afraid of you, but you must take great care. Do not stir them, for I shall not give you of their land so much as a foot breadth, for I have given the mountain of Se'ir as an inheritance to Esav. You may buy food from them for payment, that you may eat; you may also buy water from them for payment [4], that you may drink." (Devarim 2:4-5)

This is in contrast to the war against Sichon, concerning which God told Moshe in advance:

"Behold, I have begun to deliver Sichon and his land before you; start to possess, that you may possess his land." (ibid. verse 31)

But if this is the explanation, why is it not mentioned in our parasha? Our parasha makes no mention of God's words – not prior to the request to Edom, nor prior to the war with Sichon. It seems, therefore, that each Sefer describes a different aspect of reality. Sefer Devarim draws a distinction concerning the NATIONS and the inheritance of the land: since the children of Se'ir have received their portion, there is no point in waging war against them. The land of Sichon, on the other hand, is destined to be possessed by Bnei Yisrael.

Sefer Bamidbar presents a different perspective, according to which, even without any connection to the status of the lands of Edom and Sichon, it is proper that each of these encounters concluded in the way that it did. According to this view, the difference between the two conflicts arises from AM YISRAEL and their spiritual status. Following the sin of Mei Meriva, when it was clear that Am Yisrael had not yet achieved the proper level, it was impossible for them to wage war against the children of Edom. This situation connects to God's warning to the group of "ma'apilim," who – following the debacle of the spies – decided to proceed anyway to Canaan: "Do not ascend, for God is not in your midst, so that you shall not be struck down before your enemies" (Bamidbar 14:42). Following the story of the snakes and the song of the well, the nation had already reached a level that made it possible for them to wage war against the other nations and to prevail.[5]

The victory against Sichon paves the way for a promise of Divine aid in future battles against other enemies, as God tells Moshe at the end of the parasha, prior to the war against Og, king of Bashan:

"They turned and went up by way of Bashan, and Og, king of Bashan, came out to meet them – he and all of his nation – to wage war at Edre'i. God said to Moshe, 'Do not fear him, for I have given him and all his nation and his land into your hand, and you shall do to him as you did to Sichon, king of the Emorites, who dwells in Cheshbon.' And they struck him and his sons and all his nation, until no remnant was left of him, and they possessed his land." (21:33-35)

E. SUMMARY

Now we may summarize the great significance of the events in our parasha. At the early stages of the new generation, it appears that there is no improvement over the previous generation. It is this feeling that leads to Moshe's downfall at Mei Meriva. But later, after the unusual phenomenon of the plague of snakes and the brass snake, it becomes clear that through fear of sin, the new generation has learned to deal with its problems. Fear has led to love, as expressed in the song of the well, and to strong faith in God, which in turn brings great victory against Sichon and Og. Now the way is open towards Eretz Yisrael.

NOTES:

[1] On several occasions, the act of "falling upon their faces" is accompanied by a verbal response. At the beginning of parashat Korach we read: "Moshe heard, and he fell upon his face. He spoke to Korach and to all of his company, saying: 'In the morning God shall make known who is His, and who is holy, and He shall cause him to come near...' (Bamidbar 16:4-5). Later on in the same narrative, we read: "'Separate yourselves from this congregation and I shall consume them in a moment!' And they fell upon their faces, and said: 'O God, Lord of the spirits of all flesh – if one man sins, shall You then be awith the entire congregation?'" (16:21-22).

[2] The Rambam echoes this idea in his "Eight Chapters," chapter 4: "And you know that the master of early and later prophets, Moshe Rabbeinu, was already told by God: 'Because you did not believe in Me... because you rebelled;' 'because you did not sanctify Me' – to that extent. Moshe's sin was that he tended towards an extreme in a character trait – patience – by tending towards anger, when he said: 'Hear now, rebels.' God was strict with him – that a person of his stature was showing anger before the congregation of Israel."

[3] Immediate punishment following a complaint occurs in only one other place: the parasha of the "mitonenim" (Bamidbar 11:1-2). In that instance, there was no expression of regret. Note that the plague in that case affected only "the edge of the camp," while here it affected a great multitude.

[4] This fits in with what we read in our parasha: "If we or our cattle drink of your water, we shall pay for it" – although in our parasha there is no mention of purchasing food.

[5] Perhaps this serves to explain another difference between the two parashiot. In Devarim, there is no mention of Edom's refusal of Am Yisrael's request; on the contrary, our impression is that Bnei Yisrael could in fact purchase food and water from Edom – in contrast to what is stated explicitly in our parasha. The same idea would seem to arise from the attitude towards Edom that is reflected in the prohibition in Sefer Devarim (23:8-9) concerning two other nations: "An Ammonite or Moabite shall not come into God's congregation, even to the tenth generation shall they not join God's congregation forever, because they did not greet you with bread and water on the way when you came out of Egypt" (ibid. 4-5). Sefer Devarim, then, seems to be emphasizing primarily the obligation toward Edom, and therefore the text does not speak evil of them. In Sefer Bamidbar, in contrast, the Torah seeks to highlight Bnei Yisrael's sorry state following the sin of Mei Meriva – to the extent that even when faced with an immoral refusal of a perfectly legitimate and fair request, they could not wage war against Edom.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

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