

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT BEHA'ALOTEKHA

**The Three Books of *Bamidbar*
By Rav Yair Kahn**

I. *Va-Yehi Binsoa Ha-Aron*

Two *pesukim* in *Parashat Baha'alotekha* are bracketed in the Torah by upside down *nuns*:

And when the ark travelled (*va-yehi binsoa ha-aron*), Moshe said: "Arise Hashem and disperse Your enemies and those that hate You shall flee from before You." And when it came to rest he would say: "Return Hashem, the myriads of the thousands of Yisrael." (10:35-36)

Our Sages debated the meaning of these brackets surrounding the section:

The Holy One placed markers before and after the *parasha* of "*Va-yehi binsoa ha-aron va-yomer Moshe*" to indicate that this is not its proper place. Rebbi said: That is not the reason [for the markers], but rather they indicate that this section is considered an independent *sefer*. R. Shmuel bar Nachman in the name of R. Yonatan expounded upon the verse, "She hewed seven pillars" (*Mishlei* 9:1) - this refers to the seven books of the Torah. Who does this [exposition] follow? It follows Rebbi [who held that *Bamidbar* really constitutes three books]. (Shabbat 115b-116a)

According to Rebbi, the *parasha* of "*Va-yehi binsoa*" is the dividing point of *Sefer Bamidbar*. In fact, Rebbi goes even farther, considering the sections of *Bamidbar* before and after this *parasha* as distinct books. A quick overview of *Bamidbar* is sufficient to reveal the sharp contrast that underlies Rebbi's position.

II. The March Begins

As we noted in previous *shiurim*, the *sefer* begins with the establishment of "*machaneh Yisrael*" (the camp of Yisrael) in preparation for their journey to Canaan. In the opening section, these preparations proceed without any problems. The structure of the community is developed, along with its various subdivisions. Social and religious leaders are selected and awarded their respective roles. The individuals, with their singular characteristics, are

interwoven into the communal fabric. The interaction between the various institutions is defined.

At the beginning of our *parasha*, we find a ripe nation with a carefully developed social structure, seemingly ready to play their role in the unfolding of Jewish destiny. Final marching instructions are issued (*Bamidbar* 9:15-10:10) and the campaign begins.

In the second year, on the twentieth day of the second month, the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle of the Pact and *Bnei Yisrael* set out on their journeys from the wilderness of Sinai and the cloud came to rest in the wilderness of Paran. (*Bamidbar* 10:11-12)

The Torah describes in detail the impressive coordination as the entire *machaneh* begins to march in perfect harmony. The tribes, guided by their leaders, unite to march together under pre-determined banners. Each banner, which consists of three tribes, assumes its rightful position. The dismantling and reconstruction of the *Mishkan* is attended to by the *Levi'im*, who blend in and join the march, as the entire nation, led by the Almighty, begins its dramatic journey through the wilderness on the way to the Promised Land.

At this point, a dialogue takes place between Moshe and his father-in-law, which is both fascinating and revealing.

Moshe said to Chovav son of Reuel the Midianite, Moshe's father-in-law, "We are setting out for the place of which Hashem has said, 'I will give it to you.' Come with us and we will be generous with you; for Hashem has promised to be generous to Yisrael." "I will not go," he replied to him, "but will return to my native land." He said, "Please do not leave us, inasmuch as you know where we should camp in the wilderness and can be our guide (lit., "eyes"). So if you come with us, we will extend to you the same bounty that Hashem grants us." (*Bamidbar* 10:29-32)

Moshe tries to convince his father-in-law to join *Bnei Yisrael* on their monumental journey. It is clear from his comments that Moshe considered the arrival in *Eretz Yisrael* to be imminent. In fact, we are told that the border of *Eretz Yisrael* is a mere eleven-day march from Sinai ("It is eleven days from Chorev to Kadesh-Barnea by the Mount Seir route;" *Devarim* 1:2).

However, more significant is the multiple use of the term "*tov*," repeated in various forms five times in these few sentences. It seems clear that Moshe was referring to something other than the inheritance of the Land of Israel, which is mentioned explicitly. "*Tov*" appears to be a veiled reference to something else. What was Moshe hinting at, and why couldn't it be mentioned explicitly?

Rav Soloveitchik zt"l interpreted this term as an eschatological reference. Accordingly, Moshe believed that if he would succeed in bringing *Benei Yisrael* into the Land of Israel, Jewish destiny would be realized. A mere eleven-day march separated *Bnei Yisrael* from the Messianic age.

We reach the section of "*Va-yehi binsoa*" after the people successfully complete the first leg of their journey.

They marched from the mountain of Hashem a distance of three days. The Ark of the Covenant of Hashem traveled in front of them on that three days' journey to seek out a resting place for them; and Hashem's cloud kept above them by day, as they moved on from camp. (*Bamidbar* 10:33-34)

Until this point, everything has proceeded according to schedule. All the instructions preparing *Benei Yisrael* for their momentous campaign were fulfilled with precision. Everything is ready to begin the march. The excitement and tension reach a crescendo as the journey towards the fulfillment of Jewish destiny begins. The inheritance of *Eretz Yisrael* and redemption of the Jewish People seem almost inevitable. There is a sense of excitement and urgency as the first segment of *Sefer Bamidbar* abruptly ends.

III. Stumbling Along the Way

Following the *parasha* of "*Va-yehi binsoa*," we witness a dramatic shift as the *machaneh* begins to malfunction.

The people took to complaining bitterly before Hashem. Hashem heard and was incensed: a fire of Hashem broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. (*Bamidbar* 11:1)

Some commentators explain that this refers to the failure of the fringe groups among the general population.

"Ravaging the outskirts of the camp" - this refers to the foreigners, who were located at the fringes of the camp. (*Yalkut Shimoni, Bamidbar* 11, #732)

However, others understand that it includes errors of the leadership as well.

R. Shimon ben Menasia explained: "Ravaging the outskirts (*ketzei*) of the camp" - this refers to the leaders (*ketzinim*) among them, the great ones among them. (ibid.)

This episode is followed by a more serious event:

The riffraff in their midst felt a gluttonous craving; and then *Bnei Yisrael* joined and wept, and said, "Who will feed us meat!" (*Bamidbar* 11:4)

Once again, the problem is initiated by groups on the periphery; however, this time it quickly spreads to the very heart of the camp. Furthermore, the crisis of leadership deepens as well, as Moshe considers himself incompetent to deal with the challenge.

And Moshe said to Hashem, "Why have You dealt ill with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? Did I conceive this people, did I bear them, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries an infant,' to the land that You have promised on oath to their fathers? Where am I to get meat to give to all this people, when they whine before me and say, 'Give us meat to eat!' I cannot carry all this people by myself, for it is too much for me. If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!" (*Bamidbar* 11:11-15)

Eventually, the needs of the people are attended to; however, the leadership has to be restructured. Moreover, Moshe's esteem has been tarnished and his position undermined. The precariousness of Moshe's position is expressed in the strange and almost hysterical reaction to the public prophecy of Eldad and Medad.

Two men, one named Eldad and the other Medad, had remained in camp; yet the spirit rested upon them - they were among those recorded, but they had not gone out to the Tent - and they prophesied in the camp. A youth ran out and told Moshe, saying, "Eldad and Medad are acting the prophet in the camp!" And Yehoshua son of Nun, Moshe's attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, "My lord Moshe, restrain them!" (*Bamidbar* 11:26-28)

It would appear that the following episode, in which Miriam and Aharon challenge Moshe's behavior regarding his wife, not only reflects a further deterioration, as both Aharon and Miriam falter, but is also a further expression of Moshe's tarnished image. Their argument -

"Has Hashem spoken only through Moshe? Has He not spoken through us as well?" (*Bamidbar* 12:2)

- is a direct result of Eldad and Medad's public prophecy.

God's reaction is a reflection of the need to reaffirm the singularity and uniqueness of Moshe as a prophet.

And He said, "Hear these My words: When a prophet of Hashem rises among you, I make myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream. Not so with my servant Moshe; he is trusted throughout My household. With him I speak mouth to mouth, plainly and not in riddles, and he beholds the likeness of Hashem. How then did you not shrink from speaking against My servant Moshe!" (*Bamidbar* 12:6-8)

Thus, following the *parasha* of "*Va-yehi binsoa*," there is a steady decline. The institutions that have been established begin to malfunction. The communal fabric that had been woven together so carefully starts unraveling.

Moreover, the entire mood of the people has changed. After traveling the initial three-day journey, the children of Israel are a mere eight-day march from the Promised Land. However, the request for meat results in a month's delay.

You shall eat not one day, not two, not even five days or ten or twenty, but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you... (*Bamidbar* 11:19-20)

Aharon's and Miriam's challenge to Moshe results in an additional seven-day delay. The sense of impending redemption that had existed prior to "*Va-yehi binsoa*" has dissipated. The tension and excitement has been replaced as *Bnei Yisrael* camp in the Wilderness of Paran on *Rosh Chodesh Tamuz*, forty days before *Tisha Be-Av* and the dramatic events which will change the course of Jewish history (the report of the spies and the people's rejection of the land of Israel).

The *parasha* of "*Va-yehi binsoa*" is the point of transition between the flawless beginning of the journey and the subsequent difficulties and delays that eventually lead to the incident of the spies. It is the shift from the initial journey of the harmonious *machaneh* and eventual tensions that cause the *machaneh* to begin to come apart at the seams.

There is no doubt that the "*va-yehi binsoa*" passage is a significant point in the flow of *Sefer Bamidbar*. However, does this justify breaking the *sefer* into distinct books? Things began in a promising fashion and subsequently went sour, but isn't it all one unified story? Shouldn't it all be included in one *sefer*?

In order to solve this problem, we must consider another difficulty with Rabbi's opinion. According to Rabbi, the *parasha* of "*Va-yehi binsoa*" is itself awarded independent status and considered a separate book. What is so significant about this *parasha*? Why is it singled out and awarded such prominence?

IV. The *Sefer of Va-Yehi Binsoa*

In my opinion, even according to Rebbi, there are two, not three, versions of *Sefer Bamidbar* – that which precedes "*Va-yehi binsoa*," and that which follows it. The *parasha* of "*Va-yehi binsoa*" is not to be perceived as an independent section of *Sefer Bamidbar*. Rather, it should be viewed in light of *Sefer Devarim*. After all, *Sefer Devarim* is comprised mainly of the sermons Moshe Rabbeinu delivered on the shores of the Yarden, whose aim was to ensure that *Benei Yisrael* successfully inherit the Promised Land and that they behave in a manner that will allow them to remain there.

Devarim begins:

These are the words that **Moshe** addressed to all Yisrael... (*Devarim* 1:1)

The book we call *Sefer Devarim* responds to the situation that developed after "*Va-yehi binsoa*." Moshe addressed himself to a new generation that would enter *Eretz Yisrael* without him (following the divine decree that the generation of the exodus would die in the desert and that Moshe himself would not enter the Land of Israel). *Sefer Devarim*, as it is written, flows from the tragic events of *Sefer Bamidbar* recorded after "*va-yehi binsoa*."

The *parasha* of "*Va-yehi binsoa*," in contrast, is the ideal version of *Sefer Devarim*, which conforms to the ideal model of *Bamidbar* described prior to "*Va-yehi binsoa*." Had the entire nation consummated their momentous march toward the realization of their destiny in the coordinated and harmonious fashion described before "*Va-yehi binsoa*," with Moshe Rabbeinu at their head and the *Shekhina* in their midst, all that Moshe would have had to say was two short sentences:

And when the ark travelled, **Moshe** said: "Arise Hashem and disperse Your enemies and those that hate You shall flee from before You." And when it came to rest he would say: "Return Hashem, the myriads of the thousands of Yisrael." (10:35-36)

In other words, the section preceding "*va-yehi binsoa*" is not the first stage of *Bamidbar*, but the first version. It describes the ideal *machaneh* in their triumphant march towards the realization of Jewish destiny. The section following "*va-yehi binsoa*" records a separate version, the failed attempt at implementation. These two sections describe two separate stories and therefore, according to Rebbi, they are independent books.

In previous *shiurim*, we developed the idea that "*chumash ha-pekudim*" describes the geographical and spiritual journey from Sinai to the border of *Eretz Yisrael*. The first section of *Bamidbar* is a completely independent book insofar as it describes the ideal model of this journey, which was completed in the hearts of the people, but came to a screeching halt before they reached their geographical destination. The latter version of *Bamidbar* details the actual historic

journey, which began with the failure of the first generation, but was eventually completed by their children. “*Va-yehi binsoa*” is the ideal *sefer* of *Divrei Moshe*, which couples with the ideal *Bamidbar*. What we call *Sefer Devarim*, is the *sefer* of *divrei Moshe* that were necessary following the forty years in the wilderness recorded after “*va-yehi binsoa*.”

V. Real and Ideal

According to Rebbi, why did the Torah focus upon the ideal *Bamidbar* and *Devarim* if these ideals were never realized?

We can similarly ask why we celebrate Shavout. After all, the first *luchot* were eventually destroyed after the *cheit ha-egel*. Wouldn't it be more appropriate to celebrate Yom Kippur as the day that Yisrael received the second *luchot* (see *Ta'anit* 26b)? Why do we commemorate the initial attempt, which ultimately failed?

These questions would be irresolvable if we would view the Torah merely as documentation of past events. Historically, the first *luchot* were destroyed and new *luchot* had to be given. When Moshe didn't return, the people gave in to human insecurities and fears. However, this does not undermine the meta-historical significance of *ma'amad* Har Sinai, when the essential inner will of the nation expressed itself as they proclaimed “*na'aseh ve-nishma*” (we will do and we will listen – *Shemot* 24:7).

Historically, the initial drive was never consummated, and therefore it seems to have no significance. However, the Torah is not a history book, and therefore it is not necessarily bound by historical criteria. From the Torah's perspective, the ideal *Bamidbar* contains a truth that transcends the events that actually occurred. The ideal *Bamidbar* does exist, even though it has yet to take place. It was merely prevented on the practical level by certain human frailties and local conditions. However, it contains a profound truth about the essence of *Am Yisrael*, their relationship to God, and the fulfillment of their destiny. It is this truth which is the source of our paradoxical yet undying faith in the redemptive process, as we continue to believe that a time will come when this ideal will become reality.