

PARSHAT BEHA'ALOTCHA

Three books in one? So claim Chazal in regard to Sefer Bamidbar! And what's more, one of those three books contains only **two** psukim!

[This statement is based on the 'sugya' in Shabbat 116a (top of the daf) concerning the two psukim of 'va-yehi bi-nso'a ha-aron...' (that we recite when we take out the Sefer Torah / see Bamidbar 10:35-36).]

To better appreciate the deeper meaning of this statement, this week's shiur discusses an important thematic transition that takes place in Parshat Beha'alotcha.

INTRODUCTION

As anyone familiar with Chumash knows, the text of Chumash in the actual Sefer Torah does not contain any symbols of punctuation. Nonetheless, in Parshat Beha'alotcha we find a very peculiar exception, as the two psukim of 'va-yehi bi-nso'a ha-aron ...' are delimited by two upside down 'nun's' - acting like parenthesis, and thus causing these psukim to 'stand out'.

For this 'technical' reason alone, we can certainly assume that these two psukim must be special.

In an attempt to understand the reason for this phenomenon, the following shiur discusses the thematic importance of these two psukim by considering their location at a very pivotal position in Sefer Bamidbar.

HIGH HOPES

To appreciate the internal structure of Sefer Bamidbar, we must first consider what its theme 'should have' been. To do so, let's quickly review the primary themes of the previous three books, as we have discussed in our series of shiurim.

Sefer Breishit focused on God's choice of Avraham (and his offspring) to become His special nation ['bechira']. Sefer Shmot described God's redemption of His nation from Egypt, their subsequent journey to Har Sinai to receive the Torah, and construction of the mishkan – the symbol of God's presence in their midst. Finally, in Sefer Vayikra, Bnei Yisrael received additional laws relating to both the mishkan and 'kedusha' [holiness] in their land and their daily lives.

At this point, Bnei Yisrael were now ready to continue their journey from Har Sinai to inherit the 'Promised Land'. Hence, Sefer Bamidbar 'should have' been the story of that journey and their inheritance of the land. Tragically, in Sefer Bamidbar those goals are never attained; however - by considering those high expectations – we can better appreciate its content and structure.

For example, Sefer Bamidbar began by describing how Bnei Yisrael prepared for their journey to Eretz Canaan by organizing the army while establishing the mishkan at the center of their camp.

Note how this theme (of Bnei Yisrael's preparation for this journey) continues throughout the narrative in the first ten chapters of Sefer Bamidbar:

- * The army is organized and counted (chapters 1-2)
- * The mishkan is placed at the focal point of the camp (2-5)
- * The national leaders participate in its dedication (7)
- * The levi'im are appointed to become the spiritual leaders (chapters 3->4 & 8)
- * The entire nation offers pesach rishon & sheni (chapter 9)
- * Final instructions are given re: how and when to travel (10)

Had nothing 'gone wrong', it would have been precisely at this point (after chapter 10 in Sefer Bamidbar) that Bnei Yisrael should have begun their magnificent journey to the Promised Land. Instead, the next sixteen chapters (i.e. chapters 11-26) discuss exactly the opposite, i.e. how (and why) Bnei Yisrael **did**

not inherit the Land. In those chapters, the Torah describes numerous incidents when Bnei Yisrael rebelled against God, culminating with God's decision not to allow that generation to enter the land.

[The final ten chapters of Sefer Bamidbar (27-36) discuss how the second generation prepares to enter the Land.]

THREE BOOKS

This analysis can help us appreciate the location of the two psukim of 'va-yehi bi-nso'a ha-aron', as they lie at this junction that divides Sefer Bamidbar into two distinct sections:

- A) **Chaps. 1-10** - Bnei Yisrael's **preparation** for this journey
- B) **Chaps. 11-25** - The actual **journey** (i.e. what went wrong)

The last two psukim of chapter 10 ['va-yehi bi-nso'a ha-aron...'] form the divider between these two sections!

With this background, we can appreciate why Chazal consider Sefer Bamidbar as three books.

As the first ten chapters - preparation for travel - form a complete unit, they can be considered a 'book'. Similarly, chapters 11-36, describing the failure of the first generation, also form a complete unit, and hence can also be considered a 'book'. However, even though the two psukim of 'va-yehi bi-nso'a ha-aron...' form a divider, we must still explain why Chazal consider them as a book as well.

WHAT COULD HAVE BEEN

One could suggest that these two psukim serve as more than just a buffer. Albeit their brevity, they do describe the ideal fashion in which Bnei Yisrael **should** have traveled on their journey to inherit the Land. [For example, compare with Shmot 23:20-27, which describes God's original plan for how Bnei Yisrael would conquer the land.]

To emphasize what 'could have been' in contrast to what actually took place, the Torah intentionally delimits these two psukim with upside down nun's.

If so, then the 'three books' of Sefer Bamidbar would be:

BOOK ONE - Bnei Yisrael's preparation for their journey (1-10)
 This 'book' is followed by two 'versions' of that journey:

BOOK TWO - the **ideal** (two psukim) - what 'could have been'

BOOK THREE - the **actual** journey that 'failed'
 (i.e. chapters 11-36)

To accent the tragedy of **book three**, the Torah first presents a 'glimpse' of what 'could have been' in **book two** - the glorious manner in which Bnei Yisrael could have traveled, had they not sinned.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

So what went wrong? What caused Bnei Yisrael to sin at the incidents of the 'mit'onenim', the 'mit'avim' and the 'meraglim' etc.?

Chazal find a 'hint' in the pasuk (which immediately precedes 'va-yehi bi-nso'a ha-aron') that describes Bnei Yisrael's departure from Har Sinai":

"And they travelled **from** God's mountain..." (see 10:33-34).

The Midrash comments:

"Like a child leaving school - running away, in the same manner Bnei Yisrael ran away from Har Sinai a three day distance, for they studied [too much] Torah at Har Sinai..."

[Quoted in first Tosafot on Masechet Shabbat 116a].

This Midrash compares Bnei Yisrael's stay at Har Sinai to a 'school year' [quite appropriate for this time of year]. Even though they studied God's laws at Har Sinai, it seems as though the spirit of those laws were not internalized. The people were indeed

looking forward to **leaving** Har Sinai, but they were not looking forward to keeping God's laws in Eretz Canaan.

Technically speaking, they may have been 'prepared' for this journey, but they most definitely were not spiritually 'ready'. [See further iyun section.]

In this manner, the Midrash is highlighting the underlying reason that led to these sins. Once Bnei Yisrael left with the 'wrong attitude', it was inevitable that they would sin.

But who is to blame? Certainly, first and foremost the people themselves; but if we follow the 'school' analogy of this Midrash, we should also consider the possibility that the 'faculty' may share some of the responsibility as well.

As we study Sefer Bamidbar, we will see how certain incidents may even allude to this possibility. However, the first 'early warning' of teacher 'burn-out' is found already in Parshat Beha'alotcha.

HAS MOSHE 'HAD ENOUGH'?

Beginning with chapter 11, and in almost every incident when Bnei Yisrael sin in Sefer Bamidbar, we find a growing strain in the relationship between Moshe Rabbeinu and the people. Not only do the people constantly complain to Moshe about their plight in chapter 11, even his own brother and sister criticize him in chapter 12!

In chapters 13-14, the meraglim [spies] incite a national rebellion calling for new leadership to take them back to Egypt (see 14:1-5), while in chapter 16 (Parshat Korach) we find yet another rebellion against the leadership of both Moshe and Aharon.

So, what went wrong?

The first sign of this leadership crisis already surfaces in the case of mit'avim (see 11:4-14), immediately after Bnei Yisrael left Har Sinai. Let's note Moshe's petition to God in reaction to Bnei Yisrael's complaint about the stale taste of the manna:

"... And Moshe pleaded to God: Why have You dealt so harshly with Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor that You have laid the **burden** of this people upon me? 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..." (11:11-15).

In contrast to the Moshe Rabbeinu that we were familiar with from Sefer Shmot - who consistently defends Bnei Yisrael before God when they sin, now in Sefer Bamidbar Moshe's attitude appears to be quite the opposite -he would rather die than continue to be their leader!

Note as well the obvious textual parallels that highlight this contrast. Compare:

* "lama hareyota le-**avdecha**..." (Bamidbar 11:11) - with "lama hareyota la-**am** ha-zeh..." (Shmot 5:22)
["Why have you dealt so harshly with Your **people** - for what purpose have you sent me, for since I have gone to Pharaoh in Your Name, things have only become worse..."]

* "lama lo matzati chein be-einecha..." (Bamidbar 11:11) - with "ve-ata im matzati chein be-einecha..." (see Shmot 33:13,16!)

["And now, if I have found favor in Your eyes, let me know Your ways so **I can** find favor in Your eyes - and see that they are **Your people**... and how will I know that I and Your people have indeed found favor - when You allow Your Presence to travel with us..."]

and

* "If this is my plight [to lead them]- I'd rather die..."(11:15)
"If You forgive their sin [fine]... but if not **erase** me from Your book that you have written..." (see Shmot 32:30-32)

[In the above comparisons, note as well the Torah's use of key phrases such as 'charon af Hashem', 'ra'a', 'matzati cheyn be-einecha' etc.]

Is it not ironic that after the incident of 'chet ha-egel' Moshe is

willing to die in order to **save** his nation (see Shmot 32:32), while now he would rather die than **lead** his nation! In Sefer Shmot, Moshe was always 'sticking out his neck' to defend Bnei Yisrael, while now he appears to have 'given up'.

[Note Rashi on Bamidbar 11:28 where he quotes the Sifri that explains how Eldad's & Meidad's prophecy at this incident was that 'Moshe will die and Yehoshua will lead Bnei Yisrael into the Land instead'. This Midrash suggests as well that the failure of Moshe's leadership already begins with this incident of the mit'avim and is not solely due to his sin at 'mei meriva' in chapter 20. / See further iyun section.]

This parallel, suggesting a possible flaw in Moshe Rabbeinu himself, must bother every student of Chumash. Could it be that Moshe Rabbeinu reacted in an improper manner? Is it possible that the greatest prophet of all times, who received the Torah and taught it to Bnei Yisrael, just 'gives up'?

Is Moshe Rabbeinu - who took Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt and faithfully led them to Har Sinai - now unable to lead them on the last leg of their grand journey from Har Sinai to Eretz Canaan?

To answer **yes** would be blasphemous, yet answering **no** would appear to be rather naive.

TOO HOLY TO LEAD

One could suggest that the contrast between Moshe's reaction to chet ha-egel and his reaction to the mit'avim stems from the motive behind each sin.

Despite the severity of chet ha-egel, Bnei Yisrael's sin was the result of a misguided desire to fill the spiritual vacuum created by Moshe's absence. [See shiur on Parshat Ki Tisa.] In contrast, the sin of the mit'avim seems to have been totally physical - an uncontrollable lust for food ['hit'avu ta'ava].

Chet ha-egel presented an educational challenge that Moshe Rabbeinu is willing to accept, i.e. to take this misguided desire and channel it in the proper direction. [Note commentators who understand the building of the mishkan as a 'tikkun' for the misguided intentions that led to chet ha-egel.]

However, after the lustful sin of the mit'avim, Moshe Rabbeinu simply 'gives up'. He is unable to fathom how this nation, after spending an entire year at Har Sinai, have become so preoccupied with such mundane desires. Moshe simply does not have the educational tools to deal with such a low level of behavior. [In other words - Moshe was hired to be a teacher, not a baby-sitter!]

God's immediate reaction to Moshe's petition may reflect this aspect of Moshe's leadership. God finds it necessary to take some of the **ruach** (spirit) from Moshe and transfer it to the seventy elders (see 11:16-17). God realizes that Moshe must now share some of his leadership responsibilities with elders who can possibly deal more realistically with this type of crisis.

One could suggest an additional insight. In Sefer Bamidbar, Moshe Rabbeinu could be considered 'over qualified' or 'too holy' to lead the people.

After spending some six months on Har Sinai, Moshe Rabbeinu is on a spiritual level far higher than that of his nation. It is not that Moshe Rabbeinu is incapable of leading, rather the nation is on too low a level to benefit from his leadership. Quite simply, 'over-qualified' for the job. [Iy'h, we'll return to this topic in our shiur on Parshat Chukat.]

Ultimately, Yehoshua will be chosen to lead Bnei Yisrael into the Promised Land. As the dedicated student of Moshe Rabbeinu, and the experienced leader of his own tribe (and of the entire army in the battle against Amalek), Yehoshua possesses the necessary leadership qualities. He is also sufficiently 'down to earth', and therefore will be able to lead Bnei Yisrael into the 'land'.

The lesson that we can learn from this Parsha is certainly not 'how to criticize' Moshe Rabbeinu. Rather, it should remind us when teaching - to keep in mind the emotional needs of our students; and when studying - to keep in mind the potential of how much we can gain from our teachers.

shabbat shalom
menachem

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FOR FURTHER IYUN

1. See Shmot 34:30-35 in relation to the 'masveh' - the veil - that Moshe wore after his descent from Har Sinai.

How does this relate to the above shiur?

2. Considering the parallel between Har Sinai and Gan Eden, why do you think that the sin of the **mit'avim** ('ta'ava') is significant?

[Relate to Breishit 3:6-8!]

3. In relation to the Midrash quoted in the shiur on: 'Va-yis'u me-har Hashem' (10:33) : 'ke-tinok ha-boreiach mi-bet ha-sefer' [like a child running away from school]

Most children stay in school because they must. Usually, school attendance is not an outcome of total identification with the importance of education, rather a result of parental coercion. A child's joy on the last day of school usually does not stem from recognition of his academic achievements, but more likely from his expectations for having fun during vacation.

This, according to Chazal, was the level of Bnei Yisrael after their year at Har Sinai. They did not fully appreciate the privilege of receiving the Torah. Instead of looking forward to transferring the ideals of the Har Sinai into daily life in Eretz Yisrael, they were more interested in just getting on with normal life, while 'running away' from their spiritual obligations.

4. Note how later on in Sefer Bamidbar, Moshe's initial reaction to most every complaint is 'va-yipol al panav' - and "he fell on his face"./ See meraglim, korach and mei meriva.

Thus, Moshe's reaction to the mit'avim is not an isolated event. It opens an entire chain of incidents in which Moshe Rabbeinu's leadership appears to falter, concluding with the events of mei meriva (20:7-13) where God decides that Moshe cannot lead Bnei Yisrael into the Promised Land.

As we explained, the famous Midrash concerning the 'nevu'a of Eldad and Meidad (the two elders who were not included with the other seventy / read 11:26-29) reflects this connection between Moshe's reaction to the sin of the mit'avim and his ultimate fate of not entering Eretz Yisrael. Even though the Torah does not specify precisely what Eldad & Meidad had said, the Midrash fills it in for us:

"Moshe meit ve-Yehoshua machnisam la-aretz" - Moshe is going to die and Yehoshua will lead them into the Land (Rashi 11:26).

Although this interpretation is not the obvious 'pshat' of these psukim (as we can discern from Moshe Rabbeinu's reaction to Yehoshua's complaint / see 11:26-29), the Midrash may be alluding to the overall pshat of this parsha in Sefer Bamidbar. In the very same 'parsha' where Moshe is unable to deal with the mundane complaints of the people, the Midrash already sees his ultimate inability to lead Am Yisrael into Eretz Yisrael.