

PARASHAT B'SHALACH

FROM EGYPT TO SINAI

by Yitzchak Etshalom

I

INTRODUCTION

Our entire Parashah - along with the last sixteen verses of Parashat Bo and the first chapter and a half of Parashat Yitro - essentially map out the road from Egypt to Sinai. Following the climactic verse at the end of Chapter 12 - *And on that very day Hashem brought the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt by their divisions.*" (Sh'mot 12:51) - We would expect to come directly to Sinai, following the divine promise given at the beginning of the entire process:

Therefore, say to the B'nei Yisra'el: "I am Hashem, and I will bring you out (והוצאתי אתכם) from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you (אתכם) from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you (וגאלתי אתכם) with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as My own people (ולקחתי אתכם לי לעם), and I will be your G-d..." (Sh'mot 6:6-7).

The first three prongs of the divine promise had been fulfilled - G-d redeemed us at the slaying of the first-born (see last week's shiur); He freed us from their enslavement that night, when the Egyptians deported us and we left the slave-town of Ra'amses and He took us out when we moved from Sukkot (again, see last week's shiur). All that remained, following the events presented in Chapter 12, was for G-d to take us as His people - the covenant at Sinai (see Sh'mot 3:12).

Why doesn't the next chapter move us directly to Sinai and to the fourth step of the Exodus? Why does the Torah detail certain events of our travels to Sinai - and take 6 chapters to do so?

A verse in D'varim may hold the key to solving this puzzle:

...or has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty and outstretched arm and awesome power, as Hashem your G-d did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? (4:34)

In this reference to the Exodus, we are described as *a nation* in the midst of *another nation* - in other words, we were the same as the nation around us (the Egyptians); yet G-d took us out and *made us His*.

I would like to propose that the events spanning chapters 13-19 (v. 6) describe the process by which we became worthy and ready to enter into the eternal covenant with G-d at Sinai.

II

"DOUBLED" EVENTS

A careful read through these chapters brings us specific questions about some of the events:

- 1) Why does Mosheh exhort the people about observance of Mitzvot at Marah (15:26) - before the Torah has been given?
- 2) What is the significance of the *twelve springs and seventy date-palms* at Elim (15:27)? We are generally not given such detailed landmarks in our travels. Note that this seemingly minor detail is repeated in the much terser travelogue in Bamidbar 33.
- 3) What is the significance of the second water-scene, where the waters flow from a rock on Horev (=Sinai)?
- 4) Why is Shabbat introduced before we get to Mount Sinai (in the Mahn story - 16:23,29)?
- 5) There seem to be a number of "doubles" in this section - two water scenes (15:22-26; 17:1-7); two wars (Amalek, Egypt); two educationally-oriented commands (teaching children - 13:8; training judges - 18:20). Why the "doubling"?

A BRIEF OUTLINE

Let's first take a look at the events - in outline form:

- A: Kiddush B'khorot - the Divine command to sanctify the firstborn (13:1-2)
- B: The commemoration of the Exodus - including instructing our children (13:3-16)
- C: The events at the Reed Sea (including the Song at the Sea) - (14:1-15:21)
- D: The waters at Marah (15:22-26)
- E: The Mahn (Mannah) (16:1-36)

- F: The waters from Horev (17:1-7)
- G: Amalek (17:8-16)
- H: Yitro and the appointment of judges (18:1-27)
- I: The preparation for entering the covenant (19:1-6)

Looking at it again with a few added details, will give us a new perspective on this sequence. First, a word about structure within Biblical narrative.

III STRUCTURE AS MESSAGE

The Torah not only informs us in words - it also informs us in style and structure. Not only by juxtaposing certain laws or narratives (e.g. the juxtaposition of the Mitzvah of Tzitzit with the prohibition of mixed-garments - see BT Yevamot 4a); but even the greater structure of the narrative can often be instructive. A wonderful example of this is the structure of the “28 times” of Shelomo in the third chapter of Kohelet.

Perhaps the most powerful example of this “message via structure” style in Tanakh is found in the first two chapters of the book of Amos.

CHIASMUS

One common feature of Biblical literary structure - chiefly found in “Shirah” (poetry) - is known as “Chiasmus”. This form, taken from the Greek letter X (Chi), is basically an A-B-B-A (or more intricate - like A-B-C-B-A etc.) structure, with which we are all familiar in Biblical poetry. An obvious example is found in this week’s Haftarah:

Most blessed of women be Ya’el, the wife of Hever the Kenite, of tent-dwelling women most blessed. (Shoftim 5:24) which may be presented as follows:

A: Most blessed...
 ----->B: ...of women...
 ----->C: ...be Ya’el, the wife of Hever the Kenite...
 ----->B’: ...of tent-dwelling women...
 A: ...most blessed.

(The original is, as always, much clearer; but in this case, the translation works well).

The purpose of a chiasmus is to create a center and put the focus on the middle section - in this case, Ya’el.

I would like to propose that the six and a half chapters under discussion are also arranged in a chiastic structure - as follows [I will include (in parentheses) those terms or ideas which connect the given section with its chiastic partner]:

A: Kiddush B’khorot - (קדש לי...ליהם) - “sanctify **unto Me**...they are **Mine**”
 ----->B: The commemoration of the Exodus - (instructing children)
 ----->C: The events at the Sea (G-d’s war against Egypt-14:14,25; 15:3)
 ----->D: The waters at Marah (thirst)
 ----->E: The Mahn (Mannah)
 ----->D’: The waters from Horev (thirst)
 ----->C’: Amalek (G-d’s war against Amalek - 17:16)
 ----->B’: Yitro and the delegation of judges (instructing the people)
 A: The preparation for entering the covenant (לי ואתם תהיו לי) - “you will be **unto Me**...and you will be **to Me**”

This scheme allows to understand two basic things about the events as they are presented:

- a) The apparent “doubling” (e.g. the water-scenes) are sequenced in order to highlight the changes that take place from one occurrence to the next (the evolution of the B’nei Yisra’el);
- b) The “fulcrum” of the chiasmus is the point of dramatic turning, which helps us understand the goal and method of this educational process in readying the B’nei Yisra’el to enter into the covenant at Sinai. Since the fulcrum of our chiasmus is the narrative of the Mahn , we will have to examine that section with an eye towards finding the “secret” of this evolution.

Let’s take a closer look at the components of our structure to understand the developments.

IV

A: SANCTIFICATION

13:1-2:

At the first steps out of Egypt, G-d commands us to sanctify our first-born. Although this involves some level of sacrifice (offering the first-born animals, redeeming the firstborn children), its scope is minimal in two ways:

- a) It involves a one-time act (offering/redemption);
- b) It takes place solely within the purview of the family. Each family must sanctify its own firstborn - but this does not impact on the rest of the nation.

In addition, this act is a confirmation of G-d’s sanctification of the firstborn during the last plague (see last week’s shiur) - but it involves no new sanctification on the part of the B’nei Yisra’el.

19:5-6:

As we now stand at the foot of Sinai, we are called to become G-d’s people. Instead of merely confirming that which G-d already did that night in Egypt, we are asked to move forward and become holy. This holiness is distinct from the earlier one in two ways:

- a) It involves a constant sanctification involving a life of Mitzvot;
- b) It involves every member of the nation - not just the B’khorot.

We might posit that the earlier sanctification was a foreshadowing of the latter one - as if the *sanctify unto Me* was the first step in fulfilling *I will take you unto Me* - and *you will be unto Me a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation* was the consummation.

V

B: INSTRUCTION

13:3-16:

We are instructed to commemorate the Exodus and to tell our children about it - the T’fillin are even presented as a way to constantly keep this story *in our mouths* (v. 9).

Here again, we find the same two features:

- a) The story is only to be told within the context of family;
- b) The information to be transmitted is a one-time event - the Exodus. There is no mention of teaching children about laws, statutes, ethics etc.

Keep in mind (we will see more about this later) that until this time, the B’nei Yisra’el had a group of Mitzvot to fulfill - some in perpetuity - but they all related to the Exodus and were all commemorative. The one exception to this rule is B’rit Milah.

18:19-27:

Here, Mosheh is advised to teach the Torah to two groups - the entire nation, and a select group of “minor” judges. The two features, noted above, are again expanded:

- a) The teaching takes place on a national level - to the nation or its representatives.
- b) The information is an ongoing, growing process - *teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do* (v. 20).

Several things have changed here. Besides the scope of involvement becoming broadened to include everyone interacting with Mosheh and his designated judges, the nature of the information has changed. Instead of one static story to transmit, Torah has taken on a life - a life of new

circumstances and applications. As G-d instructs Mosheh regarding new Mitzvot and Dinim - and he faithfully transmits this instruction to the people - new situations arise which demand analysis and discussion of those divine words. The "story-time" of Chapter 13 has evolved into the "Beit-Midrash" of Chapter 18! The dynamic discussion which is the inevitable blessing of Torah analysis carries with it a tremendous sense of creativity (I highly recommend reading Rabbi Soloveitchik's "Halakhic Man" on this point). As R. Yehoshua avers (BT Hagigah 3a): There is no session of the Beit Midrash without a novel explanation.

Beyond the creativity, this type of learning invests the student with a sense of involvement in Torah - a partnership in creating Torah. Many statements found in Rabbinic literature attest to this approach to Torah study - the best illustration is the story of the Akhnai oven (BT Bava Metzia 59b).

VI C: WAR

14:1-15:21:

One might ask what was the necessity of the entire scene at the Reed Sea. Besides the obvious need to defeat (and destroy the army of) Egypt and to ensure the safe Exodus of the B'nei Yisra'el - there was another component which is a significant piece of this evolution.

For all of the miracles and plagues in Egypt, we never have a clear indication that the B'nei Yisra'el witnessed any of them first hand. Some of the plagues only took place in the Egyptian neighborhoods (e.g. darkness) - which means that the B'nei Yisra'el were only aware (by viewing the destruction afterwards) that a plague had taken place - but that is not the same as seeing it firsthand. That is why the verse at the end of Chapter 14 notes that

Yisra'el saw the great work which Hashem did against Egypt; they feared Hashem and believed in Hashem and in Mosheh his servant. (v. 31)

This is, clearly, a necessary prerequisite to entering into the covenant - having the full experience of seeing G-d's power.

However, note a salient feature of this war:

G-d does all of the fighting and the B'nei Yisra'el are totally passive. The verse is quite clear:

Hashem will fight for you, and you have only to keep still. (14:14).

When the B'nei Yisra'el sing to G-d, they describe Him as a *Man of War* (15:3) - it is G-d who fights for the B'nei Yisra'el, just as He did in Egypt via the plagues.

17:8-16:

See how much has changed! When Amalek attack the B'nei Yisra'el, Mosheh immediately charges Yehoshua to choose valorous men to go and fight Amalek. Mosheh, for his part, ascended the mountain and raised his hands. The Torah relates that as long as his hands were raised, the B'nei Yisra'el were successful in war - and when they fell, so did the fortunes of the B'nei Yisra'el. The Mishnah in Rosh haShanah (3:8) astutely explains that it was not Mosheh's hands that were fighting - but that when he raised his hands, the B'nei Yisra'el would look heavenward and succeed. In other words, this war was an almost direct inversion of the one that opened our Parashah (note that our Parashah is also arranged chiasmatically - war, thirst, mahn, thirst, war). In this war, the B'nei Yisra'el are doing the fighting and G-d is apparently passive. I say apparently because it is a basic tenet of faith and philosophy that G-d is never passive - but, within the description of the war, G-d and the B'nei Yisra'el almost reverse roles. The denouement of this war and of our Parashah comes when G-d declares that the war against Amalek is His war forever (17:16) - the wars of the B'nei Yisra'el are also G-d's wars.

VII D: THIRST

15:22-26

The scene at Marah is enigmatic. The B'nei Yisra'el have wandered for three days without water - yet we hear nothing of their legendary complaining. They only lodge a complaint when they come to the waters of Marah and they prove to be undrinkable. In spite of this obstacle, they don't yet phrase their complaints in the familiar litany of *...why did you take us out of Egypt* (17:3) or, worse yet *...let us choose a captain, and go back to Egypt.* (Bamidbar 14:4).

Surely the name of the place and the bitterness of the waters must have caused great chagrin among the people. They had just left the bitter work of Egypt (1:14) - and celebrated that by eating bitter herbs (מרורים) with their Korban Pesach (12:8). Suddenly, their first stop after see-

ing the end of Egypt and the embittering Egyptians is - Marah - a place of bitter waters. The lesson here is powerful: The Exodus was not a one-shot deal, where you are now out of trouble forever. There is always the potential for bitterness and trouble. This is a brand-new lesson for the B'nei Yisra'el - that their relationship with G-d is not over (which they had every reason to believe until this point); rather, they have an ongoing interaction with Him.

This idea is underscored in two ways. First of all, Mosheh throws a stick into the water, making them sweet and drinkable. This is a clear inversion of the first Egyptian plague - where sweet, drinkable waters were made unusable when he struck his staff on them. Mosheh is showing that the same G-d who can embitter waters and destroy Egyptians is the source of life and sweetness. This is followed by Mosheh's statement of the relationship between their allegiance to G-d and their welfare:

If you will listen carefully to the voice of Hashem your G-d, and do what is right in his sight, and give heed to his commandments and keep all his statutes, I will not bring upon you any of the diseases that I brought upon the Egyptians; for I am Hashem who heals you (15:26).

There is new information here - that the duties to G-d extend beyond the few Mitzvot which He already gave, (almost) all of which focus around a commemoration of the Exodus.

Note that the waters of Marah are stagnant (although the verse does not say so, there is no indication that these waters flowed in any way and every indication points to settled waters) and that Mosheh takes the existent waters and changes their taste.

17:1-7

Here, we have an entirely different "water-experience". Besides the stronger complaint of the B'nei Yisra'el (which is beyond the scope of this shiur to discuss), note what type of waters Mosheh brings forth. He hits a rock which is on Horev (Mount Sinai) and waters gush forth. The symbolism of new waters flowing from Sinai is almost too obvious to mention. Unlike Marah, these waters are flowing (indicating dynamism and growth) and come from Sinai (the source of that dynamism and growth).

VIII

INTERLUDE: 12 SPRINGS, 70 DATE-PALMS (15:27)

The Mekhilta (Parashat vaYassa #1) makes the connection -

R. Elazar haModa'i says: When the Holy One, Who is blessed created the world, he created twelve springs corresponding to the twelve tribes of Ya'akov and seventy date-palms corresponding to the seventy elders.

Before addressing the connection - why are there always seventy elders among the B'nei Yisra'el (see Sh'mot 24:1, Bamidbar 11:16)? I would like to suggest that this number held great significance for the B'nei Yisra'el - since it is the exact number of their ancestors who had descended to Egypt (1:5). The B'nei Yisra'el understood that their future was strongly rooted in their past - a past of twelve brothers, constituting seventy family members.

This is the connection with our springs and date-palms (which represent nourishment). First, let's summarize the evolution of the B'nei Yisra'el since the Exodus:

- a) They take the first step towards sanctification.
- b) They are given a system of perpetuating the story of their Exodus and transmitting it to their children.
- c) They experience - first-hand - G-d's power.
- d) They learn that their relationship with G-d is eternal.

Now - they also learn that their relationship is not beginning now - nor did it begin in Egypt. Their relationship is built on an ancient one that goes back to the Land where they are headed - and to their ancestral family which came down from there to Egypt. With this lesson in hand, they were ready for the big lesson of the Mahn.

IX

E: MAHN

16:1-27:

As mentioned above, since the story of the Mahn sits at the center of our chiasmus, it must include some clue as to how the B'nei Yisra'el evolved into the people who could stand at Sinai and become G-d's nation.

There are two central features of how the B'nei Yisra'el were to respond to the Mahn.

- a) They were to only take the proper amount per person in the household.
- b) They were to take double on Friday and take none on Shabbat.

Each of these commands (which, for the most part, the whole nation followed) carries a critical step in the development of the holy nation.

R. Yaakov Medan, in a wonderful article (Megadim 17:61-90), points out that the command for each person to restrict himself to a daily portion for each member of the household represented not only a good deal of faith in G-d - but also tremendous self-restraint and concern for one's fellow. This is how he explains the "test" of the Mahn (16:4) - that we were tested to see how much concern each of us could demonstrate for our fellow, knowing that if we took more than our portion, someone else would go hungry. Indeed, the B'nei Yisra'el passed this test with flying colors! (v. 18) For a slave people, wandering in a desert to exercise this much self-restraint was a demonstration of their readiness to stand as a unified nation and to enter into a covenant which includes mutual responsibility.

The second piece is an even stronger statement. We first learn about Shabbat in the beginning of B'resheet. G-d created the world in six days and ceases creating on the seventh day. For the first time, we are given the command to abstain from certain types of creative actions on Shabbat - in imitation of G-d. The lesson of Shabbat is integral to the education of the B'nei Yisra'el: They are not just to be the recipients of G-d's bounty; they are to be His partners in this world!

X SUMMARY

Now we can see the step-by-step education of the B'nei Yisra'el and how they come from being a *nation in the midst of another nation to a kingdom of Kohanim and a holy nation.*

Moving from a static relationship with G-d which revolves around one event in their personal past and which would be celebrated and commemorated in the family - (13:1-16)...

...to experiencing of G-d's power "firsthand"; (14:1-15:21)...

...to learning that the relationship with G-d will be ongoing (15:22-26)...

...to a reminder that their roots are ancient and that their nourishment comes from those roots (15:27)...

...to an exercise in concerned fellowship and partnership with G-d (16:1-27)...

...to a demonstration that the relationship with G-d will be a flowing source of life coming from Sinai (17:1-7)...

...to demonstrating their own readiness to fight and play a role in their own survival (17:8-16)...

...to being introduced to the Beit Midrash of Mosheh Rabbenu (18:1-27)...

...to standing at Mount Sinai and being invited to become G-d's holy people (19:1-6).

ואתם תהיו לי

ממלכת כהנים

וגוי קדוש

