**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BEHA’ALOTEKHA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Beha’alotekha of *Benei Yisrael*’s demand for meat in the wilderness, having quickly grown dissatisfied with the miraculous manna that was provided for them each day. In response, Moshe cried out to God and bemoaned his fate, his being forced to care for and meet the demands of *Benei Yisrael*. God replied by instructing Moshe to appoint seventy men to assist him in leading and tending to the nation (11:16). He then proceeded to announce that He would be sending the people quail for them to eat.

At first glance, it appears that the two components of God’s response were directed, respectively, to Moshe and to *Benei Yisrael*. In response to Moshe’s frustration in trying to lead such a large and cantankerous multitude, God told him to appoint seventy people to assist him, and in response to the people’s demand for meat, God informed Moshe that He would be providing it.

Additionally, however, it has been suggested that even the first section of God’s response – the instruction to Moshe to appoint a group of leaders to serve under him – should be understood as directly addressing the people’s complaint for meat. Although God agreed on this occasion to grant the people’s wishes, He was telling Moshe that ultimately, the solution lies in effective leadership and education. Even after addressing the immediate concern – the people’s demand for meat – by providing quail, this would not solve the long-term problem of the nation’s discontentment and complaints. After eating and enjoying the meat, the people would likely, or invariably, complain about something else. They needed not meat, but rather the skills and mindset to accept their situation even when they had no meat. And so if Moshe found himself unable to work alone in guiding and teaching the people the vital skill of contentment and satisfaction, then he would need a team of respected leaders to work alongside him. Ultimately, the solution lay in building the people’s faith, patience, resilience and personal strength, not in providing everything they asked for. (This point was made by [Rav Yissachar Frand](https://torah.org/torah-portion/ravfrand-5769-behaaloscha/).)

Many times, when we struggle with a certain problem or a lack of something we feel we need, alongside our efforts to resolve the situation we must also try to “educate” ourselves, to make a genuine attempt to feel joyful and content despite the difficulties we confront. It is all but certain that once one problem has been overcome, there will soon be another that would likewise cause us anxiety and distress, unless we are wise enough to use each problem as an opportunity to build our faith and our ability to feel content even under far less than ideal conditions.

Sunday

In the final verses of Parashat Beha’alotekha we read that Miriam was stricken with *tzara’at* as a punishment for speaking disparagingly about her brother, Moshe. Moshe offered a brief prayer for his sister, pleading with God to cure her (12:13).

Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, comments, “Why did Moshe not prolong his prayer? So that Yisrael would not say: Our sister is in trouble, and he stands and indulges in prayer?!” According to the *Sifrei*, Moshe would have offered a lengthy prayer for Miriam, but he shortened his prayer so as not to appear apathetic to her plight.

The obvious question arises, why would a lengthy prayer bespeak indifference? To the contrary, wouldn’t Moshe have shown greater concern for Miriam’s plight by prolonging his prayer? How could a lengthy prayer session possibly be interpreted as a sign of disinterest in his sister’s condition?

Several different answers have been offered to this question. *Ketav Sofer* suggests that ideally, one should pray briefly and with intense emotion and concentration. Prolonging prayer is necessary only if one is not emotionally invested. God compassionately accepts even prayers recited with little emotion and concentration, but this requires a lengthy prayer. And thus if Moshe had prolonged his prayer, the people would have concluded that he needed to recite a long prayer because he did not truly feel his sister’s pain, and thus a short prayer would not suffice. To avoid this misconception, Moshe prayed very briefly.

This answer, however, seems difficult to understand, as the *Sifrei* clearly implies that Moshe would have recited a lengthy prayer if not for his fear of appearing indifferent to his sister’s condition. According to *Ketav Sofer*’s line of reasoning, there should have been no reason for Moshe to even consider reciting a lengthy prayer, as he was, presumably, fully capable of praying with intense feeling and concentration.

Netziv, in his *Eimek Ha-Netziv* commentary to the *Sifrei*, explains the *Sifrei*’s comments differently. He writes that when somebody prays, it is appropriate to introduce the prayer with words of praise for God before proceeding to submit his request. The protocol of prayer, as we know from the structure of our daily prayer service, requires that we begin with words of praise for God, rather than rushing directly to presenting our requests and asking that our wishes be fulfilled. Therefore, Moshe would have recited a lengthy prayer, with an elaborate introduction. However, he feared that the people might cynically accuse him of indifference by not immediately crying to God to cure Miriam. They would have charged that a lengthy, formal introduction to his request for a cure bespoke a lack of concern and empathy for his sister’s plight, and so Moshe proceeded immediately to his plea for help, without the introductory prayer that would, ideally, have been appropriate.

According to Netziv’s approach, Moshe here needed to consider two conflicting interests: the ideal protocol for prayer, which required a patient, composed, respectful demeanor, and the need to avoid appearing apathetic. Moshe was far from indifferent to his sister’s plight, but he had the strength of character to remain calm and composed despite the pain he felt for Miriam’s condition. Nevertheless, he chose not to project a calm and composed image, and instead, as the Torah tells, he cried out with emotion to God (“*Va-yitz’ak Moshe*”). Despite his ability to control his emotions, he found it necessary to offer a brief, passionate prayer, putting aside the normally required protocol, for the sake of not appearing indifferent to his sister. Praying calmly, patiently and reverently is normally preferable to an instantaneous outburst of raw emotion, but Moshe felt that the circumstances dictated an outward display of emotion to avoid accusations of apathy.

Monday

Yesterday, we discussed a curious passage in the *Sifrei*, cited by Rashi in his commentary to Parashat Beha’alotekha (12:13), where *Chazal* note the brevity of Moshe’s prayer on behalf of his sister, Miriam, after she was stricken with *tzara’at*. The reason Moshe offered such a brief prayer, the *Sifrei* comments, is out of concern that the people might criticize him for prolonging his prayer, cynically asking, “His sister is in trouble, and he stands and indulges in prayer?!” Several later writers noted the difficulty in the *Sifrei*’s comment, as to the contrary, a lengthy prayer would, seemingly, demonstrate even greater concern for Miriam. Why was Moshe afraid of being accused of indifference towards his sister for offering a prolonged prayer on her behalf?

Rav Pinchas Shalom Pollak, in his [*Minchat Marcheshet* (Parashat Vayeira)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2791&st=&pgnum=42), suggests a novel reading of the *Sifrei*’s comment, distinguishing between situations where a patient needs practical assistance, and other situations. After Miriam was stricken with her illness, there was no practical assistance that could have helped her. As such, the appropriate reaction to her condition was prayer. The people, however, might have mistakenly assumed that Miriam needed her brother’s help, and that Moshe insensitively chose to recite a lengthy prayer rather than give her the help she required. They would then use his example as a precedent to choose prayer over practical assistance when a family member or peer needed help.

Rav Pollak offers this explanation in the context of his discussion of the story told in Sefer Bereishit (chapter 21) of Hagar and Yishmael. We read that as Hagar and Yishmael wandered in the desert, their water supply was depleted, and Yishmael fell ill from dehydration. Hagar moved away from her son and cried, perhaps suggesting that she prayed. The Torah relates (21:17-19) that God heard Yishmael’s prayer, and showed Hagar an oasis from which she drew water to save her son’s life. As many commentators noted, the verse states that God heard Yishmael’s prayer, but not his mother’s. Rav Pollak boldly suggests that Hagar’s prayer was rejected because she should not have been praying at that time. Yishmael needed his mother with him to provide comfort and encouragement, and thus she should not have moved away from him to engage in prayer. This was an occasion that warranted a brief prayer, not a lengthy one. Since Hagar prayed when she should have been tending to her ailing son, her prayer was not accepted.

The message conveyed by this insight is that even something inherently worthwhile and valuable like prayer is unacceptable and wrong when it comes at the expense of something else which ought to be given priority. Torah life entails a wide range of different obligations, and weighing conflicting values and responsibilities against one another can often be a considerable challenge. We must remember that no single value is absolute, and at times we must set aside important religious undertakings to give way for more urgent and pressing obligations.

Tuesday

In our last two editions of S.A.L.T., we saw various explanations for the comment of the *Sifrei*, cited by Rashi (Bamidbar 12:13), regarding Moshe’s brief prayer for his sister, Miriam, after she was stricken with *tzara’at*. The *Sifrei* asserts that Moshe specifically chose not to recite a lengthy prayer for his sister because he feared this would invite criticism, as the people would mockingly say, “His sister is in trouble, and he stands and indulges in prayer?!” As we saw, several commentators struggled to explain why a lengthy prayer would be misinterpreted as apathy for Miriam.

Irrespective of this question, it is worth noting the broader context of Rashi’s remark, to gain a clearer understanding of Moshe’s concern. Miriam was stricken with *tzara’at* as a punishment for the inappropriate comments she made about Moshe. This was made very clear to all, as God spoke to Aharon and Miriam to reprimand them for their critical remarks about Moshe, and immediately after the prophecy Miriam was “leprous like snow” (12:10). It is perhaps for this reason, because Miriam’s condition directly and undeniably resulted from her offensive remarks about Moshe, that Moshe was exceedingly careful about appearing indifferent to her plight. He felt it was especially critical to make it clear that although she fell ill due to her improper speech about him, he nevertheless harbored no negative feelings towards her, and was wholeheartedly and unreservedly committed to assisting her in her moment of crisis. Moshe, as depicted by the *Sifrei*, wanted to ensure that nobody would mistakenly accuse him of even a tinge of revenge or hostility in response to Miriam’s wrongdoing. He sought to teach us that we must show compassion and sensitivity to people facing hardship despite our legitimate grievances against them, that we must react to minor offenses with tolerance and forgiveness, and be prepared to lend assistance that is needed even to those who have acted insensitively towards us.

Wednesday

In the midst of the story of Miriam’s *tzara’at*, which we read in the final verses of Parashat Beha’alotekha, the Torah (12:3) inserts a comment about Moshe’s unparalleled humility: “And the man Moshe was exceedingly humble, more than any man on the face of the earth.”

The Rambam, in his closing comments to Hilkhot Tum’at Tzara’at (16:10), discusses the severity of the sin of *lashon ha-ra* (negative speech about others), and points to the example of Miriam. He emphasizes that Miriam was stricken with *tzara’at* for her remarks about Moshe, despite the fact that her offense was not all that severe. The Rambam enumerates several factors that mitigated the severity of Miriam’s *lashon ha-ra* about her brother, including the fact that Moshe “did not care about any of these words, as it says, ‘The man Moshe was exceedingly humble’.” It appears that the Rambam understood this verse as intended to convey that Moshe, in the Rambam’s words, “did not care” (“*lo hikpid*”) about what was spoken about him, due to his great humility. As he paid no attention to pride or honor, it did not bother Moshe that he was slurred, and yet God nevertheless punished Miriam for her inappropriate remarks, thus impressing upon us the unique gravity of this transgression.

Rav Aharon Levin (the “Reisha Rav”), in his [*Ha-derash Ve-ha’iyun*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=3224&st=&pgnum=214), argues that to the contrary, Moshe most certainly felt pained by his sister’s offensive comments about him. The Gemara in Masekhet Gittin (36b) famously extols the virtues of “*ha-ne’elavin ve-einan olvin*” – “those who are offended but do not offend,” meaning, people who do not respond to insults and remain silent when others speak offensively to them. Rav Levin notes that the Gemara does not commend those who do not feel offended, but rather those who are indeed “*ne’elavin*” – pained by the insult, but nevertheless remain silent rather than respond and allow the situation to snowball. Feeling no pain or discomfort in the face of insults, Rav Levin contends, is not virtuous. It is a sign not of piety, but of foolish disrespect for oneself and disregard for one’s dignity. Undoubtedly, then, Moshe indeed felt pained by Miriam’s remarks. Rav Levin explains on this basis Rashi’s comments to this verse, in explaining the term “*anav*” (“humble”). Rashi interprets this word to mean “*shafal ve-savlan*” – literally, “lowly and tolerant.” Rav Levin asserts that the word “*savlan*” connotes the tolerance of pain and offense. It refers not to somebody who does not feel offended by insults, but rather to somebody who indeed feels offended but tolerates the pain rather than responding. Accordingly, Rashi understood this verse as referring to Moshe’s great humility as expressed in his strength to remain silent and composed despite the pain he felt over being maligned by his sister.

Thursday

We read in Parashat Beha’alotekha of how Miriam was punished for her inappropriate remarks about her brother, Moshe, though many commentators struggled to explain what it actually was that Miriam said. The Torah tells, “Miriam and Aharon spoke against Moshe, with regard to the Kushite woman whom he married, for he married a Kushite woman” (12:1). Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, explains this to mean that Moshe had divorced his wife, a drastic measure that was necessitated by his unique prophetic stature. This explains why Miriam and Aharon then proceeded to note that they were also prophets (12:2). They criticized Moshe for undertaking a drastic measure that other prophets, such as they, did not feel the need to undertake.

Several other commentators, however, dismissed this interpretation, noting that the verse makes no mention whatsoever of separation or divorce. The verse speaks only of Moshe’s marriage to his wife, Tzipora, and gives no indication that he separated from her. If Miriam and Aharon’s criticism of Moshe centered around his divorcing his wife, certainly this should be made explicit in this verse.

A bold solution to this problem is proposed by Rav Yaakov Mecklenberg, in his [*Ha-ketav Ve-ha’kabbala*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14124&st=&pgnum=188), where he presents an unconventional reading of the word “*odot*” in this verse. This word is generally translated as “about,” or “with regard to,” but Rav Mecklenberg rejects this standard definition. He observes that the word “*odot*” is nearly always preceded by the word “*al*,” which itself means “about” or “regarding.” According to the conventional translation of the word “*odot*,” then, the phrase “*al odot*” is inherently repetitive. Rav Mecklenberg therefore associates the Biblical word “*odot*” with the Aramaic root *a.d.y.*, which means “throw,” or “cast away.” Rav Mecklenberg notes Rashi’s comments in Masekhet Beitza (39a) asserting that this Aramaic word is found in the *Tanakh*, citing the verse in Eikha (3:53), “*Va-yadu even bi*” – “They threw a rock at me.” Another example cited by Rav Mecklenberg is the description in Sefer Melakhim II (17:21) of how Yerovam lured *Benei Yisrael* away from God. The word used in this verse is pronounced “*va-yadach*,” which means to “lure” or “incite,” but it is written as “*va-yada*.” Rav Mecklenberg explains that this root is used to mean “cast” or “send away,” and it thus appears here in reference to Yerovam’s leading the Northern Kingdom of Israel away from the service of God. Another interesting example which Rav Mecklenberg brings is the word “*eid*,” which is commonly translated as “calamity” or “devastation.” However, *Targum Yonatan* in Sefer Tehillim (18:19) translates the phrase “*yom eidi*” – which is commonly interpreted as “my day of calamity” – as “*yom tiltuli*,” which means “the day of my exile.” This word is used in reference to exile, when a person or nation is banished and distanced from his or their home.

We might also note in this context the verse in Sefer Bereishit (21:11) which tells of Avraham’s distress over Sara’s request to banish his son, Yishmael. The Torah tells that Avraham reacted this way “*al odot beno*,” which is commonly translated as “regarding the matter of his son.” In his [commentary to Sefer Bereishit](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14121&st=&pgnum=108), Rav Mecklenberg references his discussion about the word “*odot*” here in Parashat Beha’alotekha, and writes that the verse there in Bereishit could mean that Avraham felt distressed over the prospect of his son’s banishment.

Of course, this theory would need to be tested against other instances where the word “*odot*” appears, and which do not seem to involve distancing. (See, for example, the verse in Parashat Shelach, “*al odot ha-eshkol*” (13:24) and [Rav Mecklenberg’s creative attempt](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=14124&st=&pgnum=192) to apply his theory regarding the word “*odot*” to that phrase.) In any event, according to this interpretation, the Torah’s account of Miriam and Aharon’s criticism of Moshe indeed makes explicit mention of Moshe’s wife being “distanced,” and this theory thus provides support for Rashi’s interpretation of this verse.

Friday

The Torah in Parashat Beha’alotekha tells of Moshe’s appointment of seventy men to assist him in leading *Benei Yisrael*. In accordance with God’s instructions, Moshe brought the selected individuals to his tent outside the Israelite camp, where they were endowed with his “spirit” (11:25). Two of the selected men, Eldad and Meidad, remained in the camp and did not join the others in Moshe’s tent. Nevertheless, when God endowed the others with prophecy outside the camp, Eldad and Meidad began prophesying inside the camp (11:26).

The Gemara discusses this incident in Masekhet Sanhedrin (17a), and it explains that Eldad and Meidad, despite being chosen for this lofty role, felt unworthy of serving as leaders, and they therefore remained in the camp. In reward for their humility, the Gemara tells, God proclaimed, “Since you humbled yourselves, I am hereby adding greater prestige onto your prestige.” The Gemara then explains, “What prestige did He add for them? All the prophets prophesied and then stopped, but they prophesied and did not stop.” Rashi explains that the other of the seventy chosen leaders prophesied only on that occasion, when they were first appointed as leaders, whereas Eldad and Meidad retained their prophetic stature even beyond that particular time.

What might be the significance of this specific reward for Eldad and Meidad’s humility?

The Gemara perhaps seeks to teach that the greatest, most enduring influence we can exert is through humility, when we specifically do not look for audiences before whom to broadcast our ideas and opinions. True, there are times when it is appropriate and necessary to search for opportunities to spread an important message, and to actively work to spread awareness of a certain cause or ideal. Very often, however, the most effective means of influence is humility. When people see our genuineness, that we are driven purely by sincere motives and an authentic desire to spread the truth, then our words will have a greater impact. Assertiveness and activism can often appear as, and sometimes are, a self-serving effort to achieve fame and recognition, and, as such, they tend to invite scorn, derision and rejection. Eldad and Meidad’s prophetic stature endured specifically because they did not pursue it, because they did not go out and look for the opportunity to preach and to lead. Their sincerity was readily discernible, and thus their message was more impactful, teaching us that we can achieve far more through humility than through assertive self-promotion.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)