**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BEHAALOTEKHA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Behaalotekha (9:1-14) tells of the law of *pesach sheni* – the opportunity given to those who could not offer the *pesach* sacrifice at its proper time, to bring the sacrifice one month later, on 14 Iyar. This law was introduced after *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to offer the *korban pesach* in the wilderness a year after the Exodus, and a group of people found themselves unable to bring the sacrifice, as they were in a state of *tum’a* (ritual impurity). They came before Moshe and pleaded, “Why should we be deprived of offering the sacrifice of the Lord at its time, among the Israelites?” (9:7). In response, God told Moshe that although these people could not offer the sacrifice on the 14th of Nissan together with the rest of the nation, they should bring the sacrifice one month later, on the 14th of Iyar.

The *Chiddushei Ha-Rim*, cited by his descendant, the *Beit Yisrael* (Emor, 5729), noted the symbolic significance of this story. Oftentimes a person finds himself in a state of “impurity,” on a low spiritual level, where he is not able to serve God on the same level as others. Whether it’s due to mistakes we have made, opportunities which we have squandered or time that we have wasted, we are all limited in what we are capable of achieving in the present, in our current position and circumstances. The story of *pesach sheni*, the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* taught, shows us that rather than despair, we should cry, “*Lama nigara*,” feeling a desperate longing and desire to achieve greatness. As in the case of the *pesach sheni*, we will indeed be unable to achieve the ideal standard, but, nevertheless, we can and should still serve God even in our current state. Even if we cannot offer the “sacrifice” in its ideal form, God lovingly accepts the “sacrifice” we are capable of making in our present condition.

The message being conveyed is that while we must always strive to serve the Almighty perfectly, on an ideal standard, we must not despair or give up when we fail, or when this is not possible. Even when our “impurities” prevent us from serving God in the ideal fashion, there is still a “sacrifice” we can bring now, in the condition in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is to achieve the best we can under our current circumstances, even if it was our own “impurities,” our mistakes and failures, which brought us to our current, far-from-ideal circumstances.

This message might also be reflected in the Gemara’s discussion concerning the identity of this group of impure individuals in the *pesach sheni* story. According to one view cited by the Gemara (Sukka 25), these individuals were *tamei* because they were carrying the bier of Yosef, which *Benei Yisrael* brought with them from Egypt so that Yosef could be buried in the Land of Israel. It has been suggested that the connection between Yosef and the law of *pesach sheni* is not merely incidental. Perhaps the central defining characteristic of Yosef’s life is his making the most of even far-from-ideal circumstances. Cruelly banished from his home and forced to work as a slave, Yosef did not wallow in self-pity or helplessness, but instead worked hard to achieve, to serve his master as best he could, thereby earning his trust and admiration. And then, after being imprisoned on false charges of attempted rape, Yosef took responsibility for his fellow inmates, ultimately being assigned the role of assistant warden, in the capacity of which he interpreted two prisoners’ dreams, which eventually led to his becoming the Egyptian vizier. Even under the darkest, dreariest, most discouraging circumstances imaginable, Yosef achieved to the very best of his ability, rather than despairing.

This is, indeed, the message of *pesach sheni*. If we are unable to offer the ideal sacrifice, then God wants us to offer the second-best sacrifice. There is no reason to fall into depression or despair when our “impurity” prevents us from being the people we had dreamt and aspired to be. We should instead continue to dream and aspire to be the best we can be under our current circumstances, recognizing that this is, ultimately, all that can ever be expected of us.

Sunday

Rashi, in his famous opening comments to Parashat Behaalotekha, cites from the Midrash an explanation for why the command concerning the kindling of the *menorah*, with which this *parasha* opens, appears following the story of the *Mishkan*’s dedication. To commemorate the event of the *Mishkan*’s dedication, the twelve *nesi’im* (tribal leaders) brought an elaborate series of gifts and sacrifices, as we read in the final section of the previous *parasha*, Parashat Naso. The only tribe that did not participate was the tribe of Levi. Rashi tells that Aharon felt uneasy about having not taken part in this special series of gifts and sacrifices, and God sought to reassure him and lift his spirits by reminding him of the privilege he had to kindle the *menorah*.

Already the Ramban raises the question of why Aharon’s concerns would be put to rest specifically by the *mitzva* of the *menorah*. As the *kohen gadol*, Aharon had numerous special privileges, and performed numerous unique roles. Why would the *mitzva* of kindling the *menorah*, in particular, console him over having been excluded from the gifts of the *nesi’im*? What’s more, the kindling of the *menorah* did not have to be performed specifically by the *kohen gadol*. Even though here in this context God speaks of Aharon kindling the lamps of the *menorah*, the Torah elsewhere mentions explicitly that Aharon or his sons may perform this ritual (Shemot 27:21). And, in truth, even non-*kohanim* were eligible to perform this ritual (Rambam, Hilkhot Bi’at Mikdash 9:7). Why, then, would this *mitzva* provide consolation for Aharon?

One answer that has been offered is that Aharon was envious specifically of the voluntary nature of the *nesi’im*’s gift. He was assigned many distinguished jobs as the *kohen gadol*, but they were all mandatory. Aharon recognized the special value of extending beyond the strict call of duty, of initiating and striving to achieve more than what is demanded. And so he felt great respect and admiration for the *nesi’im*, who took it upon themselves to voluntarily bring lavish gifts and a large number of sacrifices to mark the occasion of the *Mishkan*’s dedication, and he envied their spirit of volunteerism. God therefore reassured Aharon by pointing to his voluntary insistence on kindling the *menorah* each day in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*. As the Ramban (8:3) writes, Aharon made a point of personally lighting the *menorah* each day even though this did not have to be done specifically by the *kohen gadol*, because he understood the immense value of this *mitzva*. Aharon felt dismayed over not having joined the *nesi’im* in their voluntary measure, but God assured him that he was privileged to undertake the voluntary measure of kindling the *menorah* each day.

If so, then the Midrash perhaps conveys an important message concerning personal, voluntary initiative in religious life. While we all share the same basic code of obligations and restrictions, the Torah leaves room for individual religious expression, for undertaking voluntary, individual projects and practices beyond the strict requirements of *Halakha*. The story of Aharon perhaps reminds us that these initiatives must serve the purpose of self-actualization, and should not mimic the initiatives of others. Aharon’s mistake was in looking at the *nesi’im*’s voluntary initiative as a model which he should have embraced, when in truth, as *kohen gadol*, he had different areas in which to initiate. When it comes to voluntary religious measures that extend beyond our strict requirements, we each need to identify the measures that best suit us, that allow us to actualize our unique potential. We should not assume that other people’s areas of expertise, or areas of special focus and attention, in which they seek to achieve beyond their strict religious requirements, are the same areas in which we are to seek to pay special attention and initiate. We must each find our own path to religious excellence and achievement. Even as we share the same basic halakhic creed which we must meticulously observe, we should each try to identify our unique strengths and talents that can be used for personal initiative in the service of the Almighty.

Monday

We read in Parashat Behaalotekha of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints after journeying from Sinai, protesting the unavailability of food. Surprisingly, the people nostalgically reminisced about their conditions in Egypt: “We remember the fish which we ate for free in Egypt” (11:5).

Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, comments that the people certainly did not receive fish “for free” in Egypt. Any food the Egyptians fed *Benei Yisrael* was only in exchange for their slave labor. Therefore, the term “*chinam*” (“free”) in this verse must mean something else, and Rashi explains that it should be understood as “*chinam min ha-mitzvot*” – “free from the commandments.” *Benei Yisrael* were not saying that the Egyptians graciously fed them fish, but rather than they did not bear the kind of religious responsibilities and obligations that were imposed upon them at Mount Sinai.

This is in contrast to the view of other commentators, who accepted the straightforward reading of the verse. The Ramban, for example, explained that one of *Benei Yisrael*’s jobs in Egypt was fishing, and the Egyptians allowed them to eat some of the fish which they pulled from the water. *Benei Yisrael* now pined for this “free” fish as they grew tired of the heavenly manna which was provided for them each and every day in the wilderness.

Returning to Rashi’s Midrashic explanation of the verse, it emerges that although outwardly *Benei Yisrael* complained about food, this was not the true source of their discontent. What really troubled them was not their reliance on the manna, and the absence of a variety of foods, but rather the *mitzvot*. They felt overburdened by religious restrictions and obligations, and this pressure expressed itself in a desire for a variety of food. The Midrash thus teaches us an important psychological truth – that very often, a need that people experience is not the actual source of their discontent. Sometimes, the need is an outgrowth of some deeper, larger problem, an emotional vacuum within the person that needs to be filled. This is important for us to recognize not only with regard to ourselves, in our attempt to understand why we feel as we do and act as we do, but also in our dealings with others. Oftentimes, what people say does not accurately reflect their feelings. When they complain, feel hurt of offended, or become angry, the true source of their negative feelings may be something which they are not articulating. On some occasions, they themselves are unaware of the true source of their dissatisfaction. *Chazal*’s understanding into the source and nature of *Benei Yisrael*’s demand for food perhaps reminds us of the need to try to understand the people around us, to realize that all people go through much more than we are aware of, and that their complaints and anger should not be taken only at face value.

(See Rav Ally Ehrman’s [*Orot Ha-giv’a*, Parashat Behaalotekha, 5777](http://shmatsabaitzlusa.blogspot.co.il/2017/06/blog-post_5.html))

Tuesday

The closing verses of Parashat Behaalotekha tell of Miriam and Aharon’s inappropriate words of criticism spoken against their brother, Moshe. While the precise content of their criticism is not clear from the text, Rashi (12:1), citing from Midrashic sources, explains that Moshe had separated from his wife, as he needed to be in a constant state of ritual purity given the possibility of his receiving prophecy at any moment. Aharon and Miriam criticized this drastic measure, deeming it unnecessary and harsh. God sharply condemned Miriam and Aharon for their remarks, emphasizing to them Moshe’s unparalleled prophetic stature, and asking, “Why were you not afraid to speak against My servant, against Moshe?” (12:8).

Rashi, citing the *Midrash Tanchuma*, explains this to mean, “Against My servant, even if he was not Moshe, and against Moshe, even if He was not My servant.” Meaning, it would have been wrong to speak this way about Moshe even if he was just “Moshe,” and not “My servant,” and it would have been wrong even if he was just “My servant,” and not Moshe.

Many writers raised the question of why it would have been wrong to criticize Moshe if he was just “Moshe” and not God’s servant. Wasn’t Moshe’s unique status precisely due to his being God’s most exceptional servant?

Rav Moshe of Kobrin, in his *Imrot Moshe*, explains that the Midrash is precisely teaching that Aharon and Miriam’s remarks would have been inappropriate even if the subject was somebody of a much lower stature than Moshe’s. The Midrash’s intent is that Aharon and Miriam would have been wrong even if they had spoken of somebody who was just an ordinary “servant,” a person who served God to the best of his ability. Speaking derisively about any “servant” of God, regardless of how he compares with Moshe Rabbeinu, is wrong. The Midrash specifically seeks to instruct that although God here emphasizes Moshe’s uniqueness, in truth, Miriam and Aharon would have been wrong even if they had spoken against somebody of a much lower stature. Any “*eved*,” all those who see themselves as servants of God and try to live in His service, deserve our respect, despite their faults and shortcomings. One does not have to serve God on the level of Moshe to be worthy of respect and of not being maligned and derided. And thus the Midrash emphasizes that Miriam and Aharon acted wrongly not only because they spoke disrespectfully of Moshe, but because they spoke disrespectfully of a genuine servant of God – and all such servants must be spoken to and about in an appropriate manner.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Behaalotekha tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s journey from Mount Sinai, after having spent nearly a year at the foot of the mountain. We find in this context the famous pair of verses “*Va-yehi bi-nso’a ha-aron*” and “*U-vnucho yomar*” (10:35-36), the proclamations Moshe made when the ark, transporting by the *Leviyim*, disembarked, and when it once again encamped.

The Gemara discusses these two verses in a famous passage in Masekhet Shabbat (115b-116a), where it notes the unusual markings that appear in the Torah scroll before and after this brief unit. According to one view cited by the Gemara, these markings, which act like parentheses, signal that this pair of verses is “out of place,” in a sense. The text of Moshe’s proclamations should have been presented earlier in Sefer Bamidbar, in the context of God’s presentation of His instructions for travel. These verses were moved to this place in Parashat Behaalotekha, the Gemara explains, “in order to disrupt between one calamity and the other.” Meaning, this pair of verses is preceded and followed by accounts of disasters, and it was placed here to make a break between these two accounts. Identifying these two disasters, the Gemara points to an earlier verse (10:33), “They journeyed from the mountain of the Lord,” which the Gemara understood as a “calamity” because it refers to not simply the physical departure from Mount Sinai, but a certain spiritual disengagement from God who appeared to them at Sinai. *Tosefot* explain the Gemara’s comment based on the Midrash’s famous description of *Benei Yisrael* departing Mount Sinai “as a child fleeing from school.” The first “disaster,” then, was *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from the site of *Matan Torah*, because they left with a sense of relief and exhilaration, thrilled that they would not be receiving any more commands. The second disaster is the account that immediately follows this pair of verses, which tells of *Benei Yisrael*’s complaints during travel, for which they were severely punished by God.

The Gemara’s discussion gives rise to several questions, including the question of why it was deemed necessary to make a separation between these two tragedies. What need was there to avoid telling of *Benei Yisrael*’s “escape” from Mount Sinai immediately before telling of their complaints during travel? In fact, one might argue that these two accounts should specifically have been presented in juxtaposition to one another, given the apparent direct connection between them. It seems that after a period of prolonged spiritual intensity, beginning with *Matan Torah* and followed by the lengthy process of constructing and consecrating the *Mishkan*, and of preparing for travel, *Benei Yisrael* craved “freedom” from this experience. They happily bid farewell to Sinai, and as they began to travel, they protested their meager “menu,” which consisted only of manna, expressing their desire for meat and vegetables. The departure from Sinai marked, in their minds, a transition point, bringing them from an experience of special spiritual intensity to their long-denied physical enjoyment and indulgence. (Similarly, the Gemara (Yoma 75a) comments that the people’s demand for food was also accompanied by protests over the Torah’s strict sexual code.) Seemingly, a straight line can be drawn from the nation’s inappropriately jubilant departure from Mount Sinai to their demand for food during travel, as both reflected the people’s desire for freedom and relief from the intense spiritual burden of Torah. Why, then, was it important to make an interruption between these two incidents?

Perhaps, the need for an interruption precisely stems from the direct connection between them. The separation serves to clarify that the first “tragedy” did not necessitate the second. The fact that *Benei Yisrael* felt relieved and overjoyed to leave Sinai did not necessarily have to lead to the next step, their irreverent and petulant protests against Moshe. Although this was a natural and predictable progression, it did not have to be so. While it is true that, as our Sages famously teach (Avot 4:2), “*Aveira goreret aveira*” – one sin tends to lead to another, this does not have to be the case. We are fully capable of stopping the downward spiral, of reversing a pattern of behavior and transforming decline into progress. The tragedy of “They journeyed from the Mountain of the Lord” did not necessarily need to result in the tragedy of the *Mit’onenim* and *Kivrot Ha-ta’ava*, the people’s bitter complaints. Just because they began feeling a desire to “free” themselves from the burden of *mitzvot*, this did not need to snowball into an outburst of anger, resentment and gripes.

If so, then the Gemara’s discussion of the Torah’s separation between the two tragedies teaches us that our conduct in the future is not trapped by our conduct in the past. If we’ve developed a negative habit, a negative attitude, or negative tendencies, this can be changed. What we do today and tomorrow is not an inevitable outgrowth of what we did yesterday. Bad habits and routines can be broken, and do not have to dictate what our future selves will look like.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Behaalotekha tells the somewhat mysterious story of Eldad and Meidad, two men who were among the seventy figures selected by Moshe to assume leadership roles in the nation. As God had commanded, Moshe brought the designated men outside the camp, to his tent, where they were endowed with prophetic capabilities (11:25). For some reason, however, Eldad and Meidad decided to remain in the camp, and did not join the others in Moshe’s tent. Nevertheless, since they were among those designated as leaders, they received prophecy, and began prophesying inside the camp. Word of Eldad and Meidad’s prophecy came to Moshe, whereupon his disciple, Yehoshua, reacted angrily, telling Moshe, “*Kela’eim*” – that they should be jailed (11:28). Moshe rebuffed Yehoshua’s quick condemnation of Eldad and Meidad, expressing his desire to see all of *Benei Yisrael* reach the level of prophets (11:29).

Commenting on Yehoshua’s proposal of “*kela’eim*,” Rashi cites a Midrashic reading of this word from the Gemara (Sanhedrin 17a): “Cast upon them the needs of the public, and they will automatically be gone.” The Gemara associates the word “*kela’eim*” with the Hebrew word for “destruction,” and thus explains that Yehoshua was advising Moshe to ruin Eldad and Meidad’s lives by forcing them into public service.

The Gemara’s comment likely serves as a sober, perhaps even cynical, warning to those pursuing a career in leadership about the harsh realities of life as a public servant. The numerous demands imposed by the leader’s constituents, and the relentless criticism, scrutiny and suspicion to which he is subjected, can bring the leader aggravation instead of fulfillment, to the point of “destroying” him. (We will not deal here with the obvious question of why Yehoshua suggested imposing upon Eldad and Meidad leadership roles, when this was precisely what already happened, as they were chosen as two of the seventy elders.)

The Gemara’s comment must be understood in conjunction with a different perspective on public service expressed elsewhere. The Midrash (*Vayikra Rabba* 25:1) writes that if a person seeks atonement for a capital offense, which is punishable by death, he should either increase the amount of his Torah study, or, if not, “he should go and become a leader over the community.” Here, the Midrash explicitly encourages pursuing roles in community leadership in order to secure a source of merit with which to achieve atonement. Of course, this remark does not contradict the Gemara’s comment cited earlier, warning about the hardships of such roles. The Gemara clearly does not wish to discourage all worthy candidates from pursuing leadership, but rather urges them to be aware of the challenges that it entails, and not to expect only fame and respect.

Additionally, however, some have noted another important difference between the Gemara’s remark and that of the Midrash. The Midrash encourages a person to find for himself a leadership position, whereas the Gemara tells of Yehoshua’s suggestion that such a position be imposed upon Eldad and Meidad. A crucial difference exists between a person who finds for himself a position that suits his skills, interests and character, and an undesirable position that is imposed upon somebody against his will. The latter situation can, indeed, break a person. Undertaking demanding tasks for which one is ill-suited and in which he has no interest can be very difficult and frustrating. Of course, we all find ourselves in situations that require filling roles for which we find ourselves ill-equipped, and we have no choice but to fill them to the best of our ability. However, the Gemara perhaps warns us of the consequences of undertaking challenges and responsibilities for which we are not suited, and that are not appropriate for us. While at times circumstances compel us to undertake such challenges and responsibilities, we are urged before voluntarily entering such a situation to carefully consider whether we are indeed suited for the tasks entailed, to ensure that they provide us with joy and fulfillment, and not only with grief and anguish.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the unusual story told in Parashat Behaalotekha of Eldad and Meidad, two men who had been chosen to serve among the seventy leaders appointed to lead alongside Moshe in the wilderness. God had instructed Moshe to assemble the chosen elders around the “tent of meeting” (11:16), which we later discover was situated outside the camp (see 11:26). Presumably, then, this refers not to the *Mishkan* – which is often called the “tent of meeting” – but ratherto Moshe’s tent which he kept outside the camp, as we read in Sefer Shemot (33:11). (We might also add that the Torah there in Sefer Shemot speaks of Yehoshua never leaving that tent, and here, in the story of Eldad and Meidad, we find Yehoshua speaking to Moshe – 11:28). Eldad and Meidad, for some reason, remained in the camp and did not go to Moshe’s tent, despite their having been included among the chosen leaders. The Torah tells that at the time when God endowed the chosen leaders with prophecy, Eldad and Meidad also received prophecy, even though they were not with Moshe in the tent as they had meant to be.

Rashi (11:26), based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 17a), explains that Eldad and Meidad did not join the others because of their humility. Considering themselves unworthy of prophecy and leadership, they remained in the camp even though they were designated as leaders and summoned to the tent. In reward for their humility, the Gemara comments, they were granted an even higher level of prophecy than the other elders.

We might, however, suggest a much different understanding of these events. Perhaps, Eldad and Meidad refused to join the other elders outside the camp in intentional, brazen defiance of Moshe’s instructions. The elders were brought to Moshe’s tent in order to receive prophecy from him, in some sense, as the Torah writes: “He [God] bestowed **from the spirit that was upon him [Moshe]** and placed it upon the seventy men, the elders” (11:25). The significance of this experience, seemingly, was to emphasize the elders’ subordinate status, that they served as leaders under Moshe’s authority and auspices. Their “spirit,” however we understand the precise meaning of this term, stemmed from Moshe, as they served as prophets and leader under him, and not independently. Eldad and Meidad rejected this subordinate status, and insisted on being granted independence in their leadership role. They therefore remained inside the camp and received their prophetic powers there, rather than receiving their prophetic capabilities from Moshe at his tent.

This approach perhaps explains why Yehoshua, Moshe’s primary disciple, reacted so harshly to the news that Eldad and Meidad were giving prophecy inside the camp, and demanded that they be imprisoned (11:28). Rashi explains, based on the Gemara, that Eldad and Meidad were prophesying about Moshe’s death in the wilderness, that he would be succeeded by Yehoshua who would then lead the nation into *Eretz Yisrael*. In defense of his teacher’s honor, Yehoshua felt compelled to strongly object to this ominous prediction. In light of what we have seen, however, it could be suggested that Yehoshua reacted as he did because Eldad and Meidad rejected Moshe’s authority. Their insistence on remaining inside the camp stemmed from their demand to remain independent and not serve as Moshe’s subordinates. This naturally angered Yehoshua, Moshe’s most faithful disciple and adherent.

Moshe, however, in his great humility, was not disturbed by this challenge to his authority, and responded to Yehoshua by declaring his desire that all of *Am Yisrael* should be prophets (11:29). While Eldad and Meidad certainly acted inappropriately by defying Moshe’s instructions and seeking to establish themselves as independent leaders, Moshe humbly accepted their decision, expressing his sincere wish to see all members of the nation achieve the level of prophets.

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