

CHAPTER 5, MISHNA 6: TOO CLOSE TO G-D

by Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld

With ten trials did our ancestors test the Holy One, blessed be He, in the desert, as it is stated, 'They have tested Me these ten times and did not hearken to My voice' (Numbers 14:22).

Much this chapter offers lists and totals. The previous mishna discussed the miracles and plagues God wrought when we left Egypt, noting that they came in sets of ten. This mishna continues with the experience of Israel's sojourn in the desert, with the ten times Israel tested God's patience.

The Talmud (Erchin 15a) contains a similar statement to our mishna and enumerates the ten trials. They are as follows:

- (1) The Children of Israel, pinned against the Red Sea with the Egyptians in close pursuit, complained to Moses: "Was it for a lack of graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the desert?" (Exodus 14:11).
- (2) After safely crossing the Sea, Israel suspected that the Egyptians ascended on the opposite bank -- until G-d had the water spit them out.
- (3) Complaining for water at Marah (ibid., 15:24).
- (4) Complaining for food at the Desert of Sean (ibid., 16:2-3).
- (5) Leaving over Manna -- in defiance of the command not to leave the Manna overnight (16:20).
- (6) Searching for Manna on the morning of the Sabbath (v. 27).
- (7) Complaining for water at Refidim (17:1-3).
- (8) The sin of the Golden Calf (32:1-6).
- (9) The "mixed multitude" of nations which accompanied Israel complaining for meat, precipitating Israel's complaining as well (Numbers 11:4-6).
- (10) The sin of the Ten Spies (who returned from spying the Land of Israel with a negative report) (ibid., Ch. 13-14). At this final trial, G-d refers to Israel as "having tested Me these ten times," as quoted in our mishna.

The number as well as the severity of the ten trials should surprise us. After witnessing G-d's might and majesty in such vivid glory, Israel proves a difficult and cantankerous nation -- seemingly showing little appreciation for the blessings G-d had showered upon it and the constant miracles He had performed and continued to perform on its behalf. As a point of fact, this wasn't really the case.

The complaints listed above were virtually the only sins of the nascent nation in its first 16 months of independence, practically no trial enjoyed unanimous participation, and we hear of very few further rebellions during their following 38 years in the desert.

Still, all that being said, considering the closeness to G-d the Jewish nation had achieved, **any** rebellion should be unconscionable. Israel appears to constantly doubt G-d's abilities: Can He sustain them with bread, water and meat? Is He powerful enough to bring them into the Land of Israel? Did He really defeat the Egyptians once and for all?

But where was the room for doubt? Didn't they just see G-d's infinite might in Egypt and at the Sea? What more could G-d have done to convince them of His power? Yet they seem to reward G-d's many tens of miracles with their own ten bouts of distrust and agnosticism? So again, apart from the sinfulness of complaining against G-d, how does their skepticism even make **sense** to us?

(Likewise, the people again and again threaten: "Let us appoint a ruler and return to Egypt." Did they really think it preferable to leave the Clouds of Glory, the Well and the Manna to wander off unprotected in a desert -- and all that to return to servitude? What possessed them to apparently prefer abandoning such supernatural love and protection for heat, thirst, and exposure -- to say nothing of slavery?)

There is a critical theme which underlies much of the story of the Wilderness. Israel seems very reluctant to admit G-d's mastery and omnipotence. Now this was not because the people did not know G-d **could** do anything. Israel was not a nation of idiots. They had obviously seen G-d's true might in Egypt and at the Sea. Yet they were unsure if G-d would perform such miracles **for them** -- in fact, you might even say they were quietly hoping He would not.

Why not? Because living with G-d in such supernatural rapture is very intimidating. When G-d cares for all of your needs, provides for you in a desert, and reveals His grandeur in the Clouds of Glory and the Tabernacle, it leaves very little breathing space. It is difficult to feel a sense of freedom and free will -- and therefore a sense of existence -- when G-d is constantly watching you and watching over you. The Children of Israel felt little room for "self": they could not easily handle the intensity and intimacy of a visible, omnipresent G-d. They thus wanted "out" -- not so much rebellion against G-d, but a sense of distance -- that they existed independently, fended for themselves, and related to G-d on their own, somewhat more human, terms.

This evil manifested itself most clearly in the sin of the Golden Calf. The commentators explain that no sane person would fashion a molten image with his own hands and then turn around and proclaim "this is your god, Israel, which brought you up from the Land of Egypt" (Exodus 32:4). (Er, like didn't we just fashion the darn thing **ourselves** five minutes ago?) And again, Jews have always been stubborn, but they're not stupid -- not by a long shot.

Rather, what the people wanted was an intermediary -- something **in between** them and G-d. After Moses' disappearance (he returned from receiving the Torah on Mt. Sinai a day later than expected),

the people wanted some way to relate to G-d, some physical symbol which would enable them to perceive G-d in their hearts and minds. It would not be a god itself, yet -- they hoped -- it would somehow act as His representative -- leaving the people just one step further removed from the Real Thing. (See Ramban to Exodus 32.)

(By the way, this in a nutshell is the basis for idolatry -- and pardon my saying it, but even to some degree Christianity's embodiment of G-d. We want G-d, but not an infinite one utterly beyond our comprehension and with infinitely demanding standards. We want one we can relate to, one who is **like** us -- perhaps even one we can sway in our favor.)

This as well characterized many of Israel's early failings in the desert. They repeatedly questioned G-d's ability to provide for them -- with bread, water and meat. They hoped to see the Manna as at least a partially natural occurrence: perhaps it would fall on its own -- on the Sabbath as well, or it would not decay so inexplicably overnight (or at least it would also do so on Friday night). Likewise, many of them undoubtedly took pestle and mortar to process the Manna through the sweat of their own brows, as the Torah seems to attest (see Numbers 11:8). In truth, the Sages tell us, Manna would assume practically any taste without any preparation, and that it fell right at the doorstep of a fully righteous person while farther away from the person not so righteous. Manna was sustenance entirely spiritual -- ready to nourish a nation sated with G-d and Torah alone. But man, at times, is sooner prepared to subordinate his mind to G-d than his stomach.

When it came to the Ten Spies, the theme was similar but slightly different. By then the Jews had come to accept that their existence in the desert was supernatural. Yet they had different plans for the Land of Israel. That was not a place where Manna fell from the heavens and a miraculous well followed their every step. They would dig wells, clear the ground, plow, harvest, winnow, grind, and bake bread. And equally important, they would conquer the land **themselves**! Unlike the Exodus, G-d would sit on the sidelines this time. **They** would have to take arms and fight ; **they** would spearhead the battle. The battle, win or lose, would be their own doing. Thus, in the Land they were to have a **natural** existence: they would gain a little breathing space at last!

In truth, the Land of Israel would be more natural, but the task of the people would be to see a physical world functioning in complete consonance with the spiritual. They would plant, but only G-d would bless their harvest with rain and abundance. They would fight the battles, but it was G-d who would win the war. "Not by might, nor by power, but through My Spirit says the L-rd of hosts" (Zachariah 4:6). (How much can a nation really congratulate its military prowess if it blows a shofar and the walls of Jericho come tumbling down?)

The Spies, however, saw things differently. When they spied out the Land (and the sending of spies itself was their own innovation -- see Deuteronomy 1:22), that felt that **they** would have to fight the battle. No one was going to drown their enemies in the sea or strike down their firstborns. It was their war. It would be through their own might, win or lose, but they were going to go it on their own.

But one inconvenient little consideration here. If we have to fight this ourselves, reported the spies, we don't stand a chance. Israel was inhabited by giants; through their own means they would never defeat them in battle. They **wanted** to be alone and vulnerable, to feel that distance from G-d. But if that were the case, better to turn back to the slavery, the dependence -- the godless "freedom" -- of Egypt.

And so, the nation cried when the Spies returned. The date was the ninth of Av, a day ever since designated as a day of national mourning for the Jewish people. G-d responded: "You cried for nothing, and I will make this a day of crying for the generations" (Ta'anis 29a).

G-d's response contained great poetic justice, to be sure. But there was **actual** justice to it as well. We cried because we wanted to feel distant from G-d. We wanted to be a nation like every other, and without G-d battling for us we could never conquer a land of giants. And G-d responded with the ultimate corrective punishment. The Ninth of Av would be a day in which G-d would grant us our wish: He **would** conceal His Presence and Divine providence. We wanted distance? He would grant it to us! And we would recognize just how painful that distance is.

Thus, the Ninth of Av would become a day of tragedy for Israel -- the day in which both Temples were destroyed, the Jews were exiled from Spain, and so many other tragedies have befallen the Jewish nation throughout the ages. G-d granted us the distance we mistakenly longed for -- in the hope that eventually we would realize that true happiness stems from closeness to G-d alone.

Thus, the tragic story of the Wilderness -- as well as much of Jewish history -- is one of distance and separation from G-d. Our ancestors shied away from complete intimacy with G-d, preferring a taste of their own independence. The lesson for us, however, is just the opposite: Our own fulfillment -- our own "self" -- stems from nothing other than annulling ourselves before G-d. When we exercise our free will -- and use it to willingly submit before our Creator -- we experience a sense of infinity -- and ultimately a sense of ourselves. Through this we can slowly rectify the sin of our ancestors -- and only then will we achieve true fulfillment.

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