

PARSHAS BEHAALOSCHA

by Rabbi Dr. Meir Tamari

"They journeyed from the Mountain of Hashem a distance of 3 days and the Aron Brit Hashem journeyed before them to search for them a resting place" (Bamidbar, 10:33); this was the Aron containing the pieces of the Luchot that Moshe had shattered, that used to lead them into battle [Rashi]. This is accordance with what he wrote with regard to the verse in Eikev, Hashem said to Moshe, make you a Aron of wood to house the Luchot", that this was separate from the Aron that Betzalel made that latter had the later Luchot. The opinion that there were 2 Aronot is held also by Radak. Ramban held that there was only one Aron in which was housed both of the Luchot and that the words of Rashi are only aggada.. This is a replay of the discussion in the Gemara Shekalim (6a) where Rabbi Yehuda bar Rabbi Ilai held 2 Aronot, one with the broken Luchot, and this preceded them into battle and the other with the whole Luchot, which remained in the Ohel Moed. There, Rabbanan held that there was only 1 with both Luchot, always, housed in Ohel Moed; the exception was when it was taken out to accompany them into battle during the days of Eli. The verse supports Rabban and another verse supports Rabbi Yehudah . However, it is difficult to decide in favor of Rabbi Yehudah since the Aron that was captured by the Philistines held the Luchot Hasheniyot, otherwise it is difficult to understand why they said. This would have been unnecessary if they already had another Aron with luchot that they were used to take into battle, while this one always remained in Ohel Moed. To my mind, we have to say that there were 2 Aronot, the one of wood that Moshe made and the one made by Betzalel. However, the former held both Luchot whereas the other held the Urim Ve Tumim. The case of Shaul supports this idea of an Aron with the Urim Ve Tumim that was used to seek guidance from Hashem. The Aron with the 2 sets of Luchot always was in Ohel Moed, except when Hashem commanded otherwise, as in our verse in Beha'alotcha. In the days of Eli, Israel took it into battle with them thus removing it from its place. Since this was done without Hashem's command, they were punished. After the Bnei Yisrael had started their journey from Sinai, we read the section about the Mitonanim as well as the demand by Israel, "Who will give us meat (Beha'alotcha !!:1-11). Israel had stood for a whole year at the foot of Sinai learning the Torah that they had received there. Through such study they should have weaned themselves away from the false ideologies that they had learnt from the Egyptians but also purified themselves of the perverted attributes and the grossness of appetites and materialism that they had developed in Egypt. These two incidents tell us that they had not been able to do this.

Now the word mitonanim here is not derived from aven-sin as suggested by Ibn Ezra nor from sorrow- tzar as suggested by the Ramban but rather from the sense of one who litigates or who has

an argument against something or somebody; the text reads 'Ke mitonanim', telling us that it was as though they were mitonanim. As claimants in a court case they argued Hashem has no ears and the ability to hear, and no eyes to see the mundane events in the affairs of Man or pettiness of this transient world. So the words of Moshe, "Arise Hashem and let Your enemies be scattered, let those whom hate You flee before You", were evil in the ears of Hashem. These words were mocking and ridiculing, not doubting the power and ability of Hashem, only His awareness of our fates and problems. In contradiction to their argument, Hashem heard and demonstrated that He heard. So He sent fire that consumed only at the edges of the camp and ceased immediately upon Moshe praying, both contrary to the nature of fire. Furthermore, this fire was like that which had killed Nadav and Avihu, without consuming their bodies but rather like a plague entering their nostrils. "It consumed at the edges", to which Chazal commented that it consumed the leaders of Israel, haktzinim, who had sinned at Sinai - "they gazed at G-d (Smot, 24:11). This does not mean that now they were punished for that sin; after all Moshe had obtained forgiveness for them there. Rather, although they were forgiven they should have learnt from their error, they now showed by their argument that Hashem does not hear, that they had not learnt the truth.

In addition to the conceptual error and false belief, Israel also showed that they had not risen above the crudity and gross materialism of Egypt when they complained about the Manna and the lack of normal food. We cannot understand their weeping, as does Rashi to refer to their sorrow at the extended sexual morality imposed by Moshe since the text makes no reference to it. The 'eirev rav', cultivated a yearning, not out of hunger nor for a legitimate scarcity but simply out of material lust. However, they were too frightened of arousing the anger of Moshe, so they did not loudly voice their desires. However, Israel publicly complained and wept over their craving, thereby showing their lack of control over their desires and so they were punished. They did not ask for fish, since they understood that that was impossible to give them in the desert. They did not ask for meat rather they complained at the lack, thus showing doubt as to the ability of Hashem to supply it. They asked for those vegetables that are the foods of farm laborers, rather than those eaten by the aristocracy. Furthermore, these vegetables are known to be detrimental to health in the heat and harsh conditions under which they were living. Their inability to elevate their appetites and to refine their material needs and wants, is shown by their preference for these foods over the delicate and purified Mannah that Hashem fed them.

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