

ROUGH BEGINNINGS

by Rabbi Dovid Green

This week's parsha takes place when the Children of Israel were finally released from their extended bondage in Egypt. The nation made their way from Egypt to the Sea of Reeds, where each and every one attained prophesy. In the prophetic Song On The Sea, the nation declared in unison "This is my G-d..." (Exodus 15:2). They could point with their finger and prophetically identify G-d. One might think that this is the pinnacle of one's existence, and the top rung of the ladder of success, but a closer look at the parsha reveals a different standard by which to measure true achievement.

"And G-d was going before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them on the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to illuminate for them to go by day and by night" (Exodus 13:21). Rabbi Shalom Noach Brezovsky, the Slonimer Rebbe, of blessed memory, comments on this verse with a Chasidic explanation. He expresses that "by day" refers to the times when everything is bright, and going well. "By night" refers to times when life is filled with difficulties, and darkness characterizes one's life experiences. The main thing in both situations: "To go by day and by night." One must continue seeking G-d's will in either situation; to ask the question: "what does G-d want from me in this situation?" The emphasis is on having an approach, not panicking, not becoming petrified and unable to cope - to keep going.

Later in the parsha, after the Children of Israel passed through the Sea of Reeds, they went into the wilderness, and they came to a place called Marah, named after the bitter (mar) water which they found there. The Torah states (Exodus 15:25) "...there He (G-d) gave him (the nation) statutes and judgements, and there He tested him." They were thirsty, and they complained inappropriately. G-d's response; give them laws to learn and observe. "And He said: 'if you will surely listen to the voice of Hashem, your G-d, and you will do what is right in His eyes, and you will hearken to His commandments, and you will guard His statutes, all of the disease which I placed upon Egypt I shall not place upon you, for I am G-d your healer.(Ibid. 15:26).

The message is: What is there to do when things are going bad? Keep going and immerse oneself in performing commandments.

Subsequently the Children of Israel find themselves hungering for food. G-d gives them the heavenly Manna. But not so fast. There are laws which go along with it. Don't leave it overnight, and don't go out to collect it on Shabbos.

Lastly, the parsha focuses on the war with the nation Amalek. The preface to this war is the test of

thirst on the national level in a place called Refidim. "(Exodus 17:2-3) And the people fought with Moshe, and they said 'give us water'...and the people complained about Moshe, and they said 'why did you bring us up from Egypt to kill me, and my children, and my livestock with thirst?'"

The sages say that the name Refidim given to the place is a contraction of the words "Rifyon Yadayim" which means "laxity of hands." The sages explain that the Children of Israel were lax at that time in their study of the laws which they received. They questioned G-d's involvement in every aspect of their lives, and as a result, Amalek attacked them.

Rashi quotes an analogy to this. A man was out walking with his son on his shoulders. "Father would you please get me this, and would you please get me that? The father willingly complied time after time, while his beloved son was getting a "free ride" safe and sound on his shoulders. A while passed. They went past a fellow on the road, and the boy asked "have you seen my father?" When the father heard that, he took him down from his shoulders, and a dog came and bit him.

The Children of Israel failed in this test because they were questioning G-d's nearness to them in the situation they found themselves in. "Have you seen my father?" is not the question to ask when you're riding on his shoulders. The approach they should have taken was to plow on and do their part while the problem of water was settled calmly, and with presence of mind,

The greatness we are capable of reaching is not the result of how elevated we can get at the best times, but rather by being consistent through all the situations we find ourselves in. The prophesy attained at the Sea of Reeds was a gift given to the people at that time of the birth of our nation. However, the subsequent lessons which they learned in those critical beginning months of our nationhood, and taught us, is that true greatness begins and ends with knowledge of Torah, and dedication of one's actions to living up to that knowledge "to go by day and by night."

Good Shabbos!

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