

PARSHAS BESHALACH

by Gedalia Litke

When Pharaoh and his army were in hot pursuit the Bnei Yisroel cried out (vayitz'aku) to Hashem. (14:10). Immediately afterward (14:11-12) they told Moshe how upset they were that he took them out of Egypt and that it would have been preferable to remain in Egypt rather than die in the desert.

Onkeles translates vayitz'aku in the sense of crying out with a complaint (see Ramban). According to Onkeles the flow of the psukim is understandable. First they complained to Hashem, then they turned to Moshe.

Rashi, however, translates vayitz'aku in the sense of crying out in prayer, meaning that they davened. Rashi, quoting the Mechilta, says this was an adoption of the behavior of their forefathers who instituted davening.

According to Rashi, (i) how are we to understand the flow of the psukim - if they were davening presumably they were not complaining to Hashem, so why would they turn to complain to Moshe, and (ii) why does Rashi tell us that they adopted the behavior of their forefathers; Rashi could just say simply that vayitz'aku means they davened - what compels Rashi to describe the source of davening at this juncture?

[Ba'er Haytev explains that they first davened, but, when feeling that their prayers were unanswered, they turned against Moshe. The Ramban explains that there were different groups within the Jewish people - some, a minority, went to daven sincerely, others went to complain. These explanations would answer the first question but not the second.]

The Maharal (in Gur Aryeh) gives an ingenious (and timelessly relevant) explanation. Rashi is bothered by the first question of how to reconcile the flow of the psukim; how does davening lead to complaining. By saying that they adopted the davening behavior of their forefathers (instead of simply saying that vayitz'aku means they davened) Rashi is explaining that their prayers were not sincere; they davened because it was a family custom to do so, but they did not have kavana or really believe in the power of their davening. So first they davened (without kavana) because that was their (mindless) custom, then they turned against Moshe, which was their true agenda.