

WORK WE MUST

by Nechama Stampler

Work We Must¹

These are the words that Moshe spoke to all Israel, on the other side of the Jordan, concerning the Wilderness, concerning the Aravah, opposite the Reed Sea, between Paran and Tophel and Lavan...

Rashi: R. Yochanan said, "We have reviewed all Scripture and we cannot find places called Tophel and Lavan. Rather, Moshe used allusions to rebuke them. He chastised them for the words of complaint they uttered against the man, which is Lavan/white. He rebuked them for how they acted in the Paran wilderness though the sending of the spies.

Gur Aryeh: The important identifier here is the word Lavan/ white, which is a giveaway for the man. Why does the Torah spend two words on the incident of their dissatisfaction with the man? What use is there in having a second word - Tophel - to refer to the same episode?

The Torah tells us that their rejection of the man was a double transgression. However one appreciates or does not appreciate a gift from him, it is wrong to reject it. Even if the man would have been objectively bad from a human standpoint, a person ought to accept with profound thanks anything given to him for his needs by Hashem. As it was, however, the man was objectively a very fine food. Treating it as inadequate therefore involved a second level of transgression: rejecting a Divine gift, and mocking it for deficiencies from which it did not suffer.

This approach fails to satisfactorily explain all the elements of the pesukim. Why does the Torah locate the action between Paran and Tophel, and Lavan? If each place name alludes to a different regrettable episode that occurred during the previous forty years, the preposition "between" seems unwarranted. It should have simply spoken of "at Paran and Tophel."

The Sifrei, however, gleams an important insight from this anomaly in the text. Had the Torah not expressed itself the way it does, we would have assumed that the shortcomings of the Jewish people manifested themselves only at the "beginning" of each journey (in the words of the Sifrei), but not between destination points. In other words, we would presume that while on the road, while preoccupied with their travels, they would not have occasion to sin. Their string of failures, we would assume each occurred while they were in a relatively comfortable state of equilibrium - while at rest, or shortly thereafter.

Do not think that they had a lessened opportunity for sin while on the road because the rigors of the

journey left them no time for mischief. The Sifrei means something much deeper than that, something about the very nature of the yetzer hora / Malach Ha-Maves/ Soton - for they are all one and the same.²

The function of the yetzer hora - the reason it was created, its goal in its mission statement - is to create deficiency where there is some level of completion. It tries to tear down what is built up, to create disorder where order has been imposed. It does not address itself to people who have not arrived at even ostensible completion. People who see themselves and treat themselves as incomplete, as works in progress, are allowed to continue undisturbed and unmolested. They will not be accosted by any special challenge or temptation of the yetzer hora, beyond the desires and passions that are part of all of our natures.

The episode of the Bnei Yisrael succumbing to the advances of the Moabite women is introduced in the Torah with the words, "Yisrael settled/dwelt in Shittim."³ Chazal⁴ see in this a causal relationship. Wherever the Torah uses the expression sat/settled, it implies pain and anguish. This is because the state of rest implies some amount of completion, of finishing a journey, a task, a process. It is the assumption of such a state that makes us targets of and vulnerable to the yetzer hora. That leads to anguish and pain. While people are still in motion, in process, involved in the activities they need to accomplish, they are not targeted by the yetzer hora, and not so likely to sin. Once they kick back, they assume positions of accomplishment, and make themselves attractive to the depredations of the yetzer hora.

This observation about the yetzer hora is behind another passage in the gemara. When does the yetzer hora enter a person, the gemara⁵ would like to know. One opinion is that the yetzer hora makes its grand entrance at the moment that the fetus emerges from the womb to the external world. The reason is as we explained above. The yetzer hora does not relate to things that are patently incomplete, and in the process of becoming more complete. Throughout pregnancy, the fetus is being readied for the moment that it is complete enough to survive as a viable being, no longer tethered to its mother. As the new baby emerges, it transitions from fetus to neonate. It arrives at a milestone of completion - and the yetzer hora is ready to begin its work of tearing it down.

We now understand what the Sifrei means. Observing the succession of failures of some of the Bnei Yisrael, we would assume that they all occurred during periods of rest, of stasis. At times that they were not focused on what was ahead, what had to be accomplished, they were vulnerable to whatever the yetzer hora threw at them. We would not have seen them as failing while occupied with other goals, with getting there. The Torah uses the preposition "between" to tell us that even at such times, they carried their failure with them. They sinned between the end points of Paran and Tophel, i.e. the places where they complained about the mon⁶ and they sent the spies.⁷ The Torah

tells us that the transgressions did not begin with their stay and rest at the destination points. Even while they were on the road, and hence less likely to sin, they journeyed with a sense of disbelief in Hashem's Providence and with rejection of the great gift of the Land.

Sources:

1. Based on Gur Aryeh, Devarim 1:1; Divrei Chaim 2:2
 2. Bava Basra 16A
 3. Bamidbar 25:1
 4. Sanhedrin 106B
 5. Sanhedrin 99B
 6. Bamidbar 11:4-34
 7. Bamidbar 13:3
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