

A TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS

by Shlomo Katz

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Beshalach

In this week's parashah, Bnei Yisrael begin their journey through the desert and the mahn begins to fall to feed them. The midrash says that the amount of mahn which fell every day was enough to feed the entire nation for 2,000 years. Why so much?

R' Yechezkel Abramsky z"l explains: Bnei Yisrael said (in the words of Tehilim 78:19-20), "Can G-d prepare a table in the wilderness? . . . [C]an He give bread also?" Therefore, Hashem had to show them that nothing is too difficult for Him, for the whole world is His.

Hashem knew that the road that lay before Bnei Yisrael until they would come to their land was long. If they did not have complete faith in Hashem, who knows whether they would withstand the journey [as many did not]?

We can appreciate how difficult those years were from the verse in Yirmiyahu (2:2), "Thus said Hashem, 'I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me into the wilderness, into an unsown land'." Here the prophet announces in the name of G-d that the Jewish people did a kindness for Hashem by trusting Him to lead them in the desert. This was even after Hashem had demonstrated His greatness through the plagues in Egypt.

Why did Hashem provide enough food for 2,000 years (rather than some other number)? Chazal say that our world will exist for 6,000 years, of which the first 2,000 years (from Adam to Avraham) are the era of darkness and confusion, the next 2,000 years are the era of Torah, and the last 2,000 years are the era of [anticipating] mashiach. Hashem wished to allude to Bnei Yisrael that the falling mahn could instill faith, but only Torah study could make that faith last. (Chazon Yechezkel: Kovetz Ma'amarim p.65)

"An Astonishing Midrash"

One day, Rabbi Tarfon and the Sages were sitting in the shade of a dovecote in Yavneh. The question was asked, "Why were the Arabs who brought Yosef to Egypt transporting spices [rather than oil - see Rashit]?"

Rabbi Tarfon answered, "So that Yosef would not suffer from the smell of the oil."

The questioners continued: "You have taught us that this was in Yosef's merit. Now teach us what berachah one says on drinking water."

Rabbi Tarfon answered, "Borei nefashot rabbot." [Ed. Note: Rabbi Tarfon held that the blessing which we say after drinking water should be said before drinking water, and the blessing of she'hakol, which we say before drinking, is not recited over water at all.]

The questioners continued: "You have taught us the blessing over water. Now teach us why the tribe of Yehuda merited royalty."

To this, Rabbi Tarfon first answered that it was because he saved Yosef, but the questioner refuted this answer. Rabbi Tarfon then answered, "Because at the Yam Suf/Red Sea, each tribe refused to enter the sea first. Finally Nachson ben Aminadav of the tribe of Yehuda, and his tribe with him, jumped into the waves."

The sages seated with Rabbi Tarfon agreed with this answer. (Source: Mechilta, Parashat Beshalach on verse 14:22)

What is the connection between the various questions that Rabbi Tarfon was asked? (The way the questioner repeated the previous question before asking a new one implies that there is a connection.) The answer is as follows:

Rabbi Tarfon holds that the berachah on water cannot be "She'hakol nihyeh be'devaro"/"Everything came into existence through His word," because Rabbi Tarfon holds that water was the first creation. Before water was created, there was nothing in the world to which Hashem could speak His words. (We, who do say she'hakol on water, hold that the heavens and earth were created first.)

The midrash (commenting on verse 14:27) offers two reasons why the Red Sea split for Bnei Yisrael. One view says that it was in the merit of the bones of Yosef which traveled with Bnei Yisrael. The other view says that when Hashem created the sea, He imposed a condition that the water would split for the Jewish people.

Rabbi Tarfon must hold like the first view in the midrash, which emphasizes the greatness of Yosef, for according to Rabbi Tarfon (who says that water was the first creation), to whom could Hashem express this condition before water was created? This is consistent with Rabbi Tarfon's view (above) that the Arabs who brought Yosef to Egypt "happened" to be transporting spices so that the righteous Yosef would not suffer.

Yet this presents a new problem: We are taught that Yehuda's tribe earned royalty by jumping into the sea first. However, if the sea split in Yosef's merit, then how could Yehuda rule over Yosef?

Therefore, says Rabbi Tarfon (above), it must be that all of the tribes - including Yosef - were standing on the banks of the sea refusing to go in. The tribe of Yehuda, which did jump in, was

rewarded.

(Binat Nevonim)

"Bnei Yisrael went up from Egypt 'chamushim'." (13:18)

The midrash explains that the word 'chamushim' comes from the root "chamesh"/"five." Only one-fifth (some say 1/500 or 1/5,000) of Bnei Yisrael left Egypt. Those who were rich and did not want to leave died during the plague of darkness.

Another midrash says, "Why did Hashem appear to Moshe from a thornbush? Because just as the thornbush is the toughest of all trees, so the enslavement in Egypt was the toughest of all exiles."

R' Yitzchak Arieli z"l (author of Einayim La'mishpat) observes: It would seem from these sources that only a small fraction of Bnei Yisrael were enslaved in Egypt. However, for those who were enslaved, the enslavement was bitter indeed.

Those who led a good life in Egypt did not want to leave, and, therefore, they did not merit to leave. Those who suffered in Egypt and did want to leave, merited to leave. Even Datan and Aviram who had tried to get Moshe killed - after they lost their wealth [see Rashi to 4:19] and felt the pain of the exile, they wanted to leave and so they merited to leave.

And so it is with every exile - those who want to be redeemed merit to return to Eretz Yisrael.

(Midrash Ariel)

"This is my G-d and I will glorify Him; the G-d of my father and I will exalt Him." (15:2)

Rashi comments: "I am not the beginning of holiness; rather, holiness and His Godliness are firmly established upon me from the day of my forefathers."

R' Joseph B. Soloveitchik z"l explains: Every Jew has two types of holiness within him - one from being born a Jew, and the other through his own acceptance of G-d. This is why the gemara says, on the one hand (Sanhedrin 44a), "A Jew, even after he has sinned, is still a Jew," and, on the other hand (Chullin 5a), "An apostate has the legal status of a non-Jew." Due to one's inheritance from the Patriarchs, he always remains a Jew; however, an apostate loses his personal holiness.

(Quoted in Nefesh Harav p.282)

"There He established for [the nation] a decree and an ordinance." (15:25)

Rashi explains that in this place, called "Marah," Hashem commanded Bnei Yisrael regarding some of the mitzvot.

Why?

R' Eliezer Friedman shlita (of Montreal) answers: When a person is lacking in spirituality, all the riches in the world will not bring him lasting happiness. Marah took its name from the fact that the water there was bitter. Imagine! Bnei Yisrael had just gathered the riches which washed ashore at the Yam Suf/Red Sea, and they should have been on top of the world. If they were so unhappy with their lot that they could complain about the taste of the water, this was a sure sign that they needed the Torah.

(Emunat Yirmiyahu)

R' Yehuda al-Barceloni z"l
early 12th century

Although R' Yehuda is not well known today, the 13th century sage, R' Menachem Ha'meiri, placed him alongside Rashi, Rif and Ra'avad III as one of "the patriarchs of the Talmud . . . from whom the entire world [of Talmudic commentary] sprang." Ramban wrote that R' Yehuda was expert in all Geonic works.

Like Rif (i.e., R' Yitzchak Alfasi), R' Yehuda composed a work which offers the reader a clear halachic decision based upon the Talmud, citing only as much of the source as is necessary for the halachah. However, whereas Rif does not quote much Geonic data, R' Yehuda supplied not only the Geonic opinions but also quoted the commentators and codifiers who preceded him, including Rif.

R' Yehuda's work had three parts: Sefer Ha'ittim, dealing with everyday laws such as prayers, tefilin, kashrut, Shabbat and yom tov; Sefer Yichus She'air Basar, dealing with marriage and divorce; and Sefer Ha'dinim, dealing with civil law. (The middle section has been lost.) He also wrote a commentary on the kabbalistic work Sefer Yetzirah, discussing that work from a scientific and philosophical point of view. This too has been lost. (Sources: The Artscroll Rishonim, p. 76)

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