

PARSHAS MATOS & MASEI - A WINNING STRATEGY

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A Winning Strategy¹

Avenge the Bnei Yisrael against the Midianites. Afterwards, you will be gathered unto your people.

Why are we told that Moshe's death hinged on the military campaign against Midian? More importantly, why was Moshe told this in advance?

A midrash[2] sees the battle against Midian as a kind of granting a last wish to Moshe. It is a rare treat to witness - in this world - Hashem evening the score against one of His enemies. Hashem wished to give Moshe the pleasure of witnessing it.

We could explain differently. We might be looking at a principle that shows itself elsewhere.

As a consequence of Achan's trespass, Yehoshua's forces were initially rebuffed at Ai. After dealing with this tragic defeat, Yehoshua came to terms with HKBH, Who reassured him that victory was at hand in the next attempt against Ai. Nonetheless, Hashem instructed Yehoshua to set an ambush to the rear of the city.

With Hashem guaranteeing victory, why would an ambush be necessary? G-d has no need for any of the tactics of conventional warfare. His Will that the Bnei Yisrael prevail should have been the necessary and sufficient condition for a resounding victory.

The point is that danger lurks in dangerous places - and any place in which people commit a grave sin becomes a dangerous location. Because the nation sinned at Ai, it would remain a place where individuals might succumb to harm, even if the nation as a whole was assured victory. The ambush was necessary to address that danger. The Bnei Yisrael were instructed to wage their war with greater precautions and with the greater concern for the ordinary rules of engagement. They needed to pay just a bit more attention to what the world of teva demands, reacting in ways that would not be necessary if they could rely on Hashem's miraculous intervention alone.

The impending war against Midian was precipitated by the failure of the Jewish people with Ba'al Pe'or. That aveirah would continue to be a thorn in their side, inviting retribution by Hashem's attribute of Judgment. This made the war a much riskier affair than other wars. Even a Divine guarantee of victory would not eliminate the risk of death to individual soldiers.

Something had to counter the elevated risk level. That element was the personal merit of Moshe. This is the reason for linking the war with Moshe's death. Moshe was told that the war could not wait. It had to be conducted in his lifetime, so that his davening and his merit would counter the riskiness of the enterprise.

Moshe takes a cue from Hashem, and finds his own ways to additionally link the upcoming battle with merits. He commands the putting together of an armed force "against Midian to inflict Hashem's vengeance against Midian[3]." The repetition of the word "Midian" is striking, but easy to account for. Moshe wished to underscore the purpose of raising the army. He wanted every step on the road to war to focus on Hashem's plan, i.e., to make it more lishmah. By doing so, he hoped to increase the zechus of the mitzvah.

Moshe continues: "A thousand from a shevet; a thousand from a shevet[4]." Every shevet has its own character, its own contribution - and its own zechus. By drawing soldiers from every shevet, Moshe hoped to multiply the merit in his army.

Finally, "Moshe sent them - a thousand from each shevet[5]." Sending them forth in his name made them all his agents. By associating himself with their mission, by turning each soldier into a surrogate for himself, he wished to send his own merits into the battle with them.

Who's On Forth?⁶

These are the journeys of the Bnei Yisrael who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, at the hand of Moshe and Aharon. Moshe wrote their goings forth according to their journeys, at the instruction of Hashem. These where their journeys according to their goings forth.

Journeys according to goings forth, and goings forth according to journeys. What is going on?

We can account for all the repetitions, and the inversions within the repetitions, through one simple observation. The forty years they spent in the wilderness can be divided into three distinct periods. Each one is alluded to in these psukim.

From the time the Bnei Yisrael left Egypt until they the sending of the spies from Kadesh Barnea, the single goal of their travel was to approach the land of Israel. Having gone forth/escaped from Egypt, their sole purpose in travelling was to draw closer to their destination. The "going forth" was behind them; what now animated them was the expectation of entering and taking possession of our holy land.

The sin of the meraglim changed all that, of course. From then until almost the very end of the forty years, they would wander without apparent purpose. We too easily suppose that this somehow was a punishment that perfectly fit the crime. But upon further thought, is hard to see it that way. The old generation was to be punished; a new one needed to dissociate itself from the sins of their fathers.

The older generation of sinners could have been removed from the scene in short order, allowing a younger generation to march into the land, untainted by the sins of their predecessors. Why wait?

The reason this did not happen is not given in Chumash. Hashem did not want to kick them when they were down by telling them the reason - which had to do with even darker days on the distant horizon. Their lives had become dark and somber through the Divine edict that turned them into walking corpses. Still trying to deal with the enormity of their crime, they were not yet ready to hear about tragedies in the future. But it was those future tragedies that determined the course of the next decades.

One way or another, full awareness of Hashem needs to permeate every nook and cranny of the world. G-d's goals for mankind can only be met with that precursor in place. Had the Bnei Yisrael not spurned the Land when they were poised at its threshold, they would have lived lives on the cutting edge of human spiritual output. Divine Providence would have accompanied them in an open and manifest manner. They would have been dealt with immediately when they strayed, just as they were in the Wilderness. Their example of the immediacy of Hashem's presence in their lives would have attracted the attention of other nations, and eventually all of Mankind would have learned from that example. In that way, they would have been the vehicles to bring knowledge of Hashem to all inhabitants of the earth.

They missed that opportunity through the aveirah of the meraglim. The goal, however, remained the same. Jews would still be the vehicle to bring knowledge of Hashem to the world, although it would now be through a circuitous and laborious process. Hashem would exile them to the far corners of the earth, where they would survive against all odds. Slowly, their core message about the absolute Oneness of G-d would take hold of those with whom they had contact.

The forty years of wandering, seemingly aimlessly, prepared the Jewish nation for its mission in history. In the post-meraglim world, that mission had been transformed into a long galus of seemingly aimless wandering with no end in sight. They did not understand the purpose of their lives, but accepted their lot as the Will of G-d. They acquired in those years the national composure and resolve to weather the long storm ahead of their offspring.

In this period, the destination, the journey to somewhere, was not important. The purpose of those decades was in surviving the disruptions, the goings forth. The Torah tells us that Moshe "Moshe wrote their goings ... at the instruction of Hashem." This did not have to be mentioned in regard to the first period, whose journeys were certainly worthy of being recorded. Here, the point is that Moshe wrote about them only at the instruction of Hashem, for reasons no one understood at the time.

Finally, arriving in Edomite territory in the Tzin Wilderness, they set their eyes once more upon their destination in Israel. Once again, as had been the case at the beginning of the forty years, their focus was the journey, which became more important than the going forth.

1. *Based on Ha'mek Davar Bamidbar 31:2-6*
 2. Bamidbar Rabbah 22:5
 3. Bamidbar 31:3
 4. Bamidbar 31:4
 5. Bamidbar 31:6
 6. Based on Haamek Davar, Bamidbar 33:1-2; 14:21,34
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