

IT'S SUMMERTIME, AND THE PARSHIYOS ARE DEPRESSING

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Behaaloscha

It's Summertime, And The Parshiyos Are Depressing

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 420, Fish and Meat. Good Shabbos!

A certain chassidic Jew came to visit the Gerrer Rebbe (The Chidushei HaRim). The chassid looked depressed and the Rebbe asked what was troubling him. The response was that he was bothered by the fact that it was summer. The Rebbe then asked if the heat bothered him. The chassid responded that his problem was not with the weather -- it was with the weekly Torah portions. For two months during the summer, we read parsha after parsha that relates troubling episodes about the attitudes and behavior of our ancestors in the Wilderness.

Beha'aloscha, Shelach, Korach, Chukas, Balak, Pinchas, and Mattos-Massei contain incident after incident in which the pioneers of our nation acted in a manner unbecoming of the "Dor Deah" ["Generation of Knowledge"] which they were supposed to represent. In these parshiyos, the Torah describes sin following sin, complaint following complaint, rebellion following rebellion. "If this can happen to the generation that received the Torah at Sinai, what hope is there for us?" moaned the visiting chassid.

Of course a person needs to be on a very high spiritual plane in order to become depressed for such reasons. Most people who are down during this time of year in fact are down because of the heat or some other minor reason!

The Chidushei HaRim responded that the "sins" that were committed by the generation of the wilderness are not "sins" in our sense of the word. At our level, these actions would in fact be considered to be "mitzvos," perhaps greater than the mitzvos we do.

This is the introduction to any analysis we might provide over the next several weeks of the various "sinful" incidents related in these "summertime parshiyos." The incidents, as they actually occurred, are only considered sins in contrast to the high spiritual level of the generation.

The Upside Down 'Nun's Symbolize Inconsistent Behavior

This week's parsha contains the first of many unfortunate incidents in Sefer Bamidbar. Parshas Beha'aloscha also contains the unusual upside down appearance of two letter 'Nun's which bracket the pasukim [verses] "When the Ark would journey, Moshe said 'Arise, Hashem, and let Your enemies be scattered and let those who hate You flee from before You.' And when it rested, he would say, 'Reside tranquilly Hashem among the myriads and thousands of Israel.'" [Bamidbar 10:35-36].

The Talmud explains that this section is bracketed to indicate that sequentially it does not belong here. It should really have appeared in the Parsha of Bamidbar or Naso where the formations and the travels of the camp were discussed. The reason why it was placed here was to put separation between the "first account of punishment" and the "second account of punishment" (to relieve the gloomy impact of an otherwise unbroken narration of one punishment after another) [Shabbos 115b].

The Talmud identifies the "second punishment" as the section that begins "And the people were like those who seek pretexts of evil in the ears of Hashem" ("vayehi ha'am k'mis-onen-nim...") [Bamidbar 11:1]. The people complained they were sick of the manna, they longed for the food delicacies of Egypt. The punishment was a heavenly fire that descended and consumed at the edges of the camp. However, to which "first punishment" is the Talmud referring?

The allusion to a "first punishment" is more subtle. The Talmud identifies it with the pasuk [verse], "And they journey from the Mountain of Hashem..." [Bamidbar 10:33]. Rabbi Chama son of Rabbi Chanina elaborates: "They journeyed away from Hashem." Tosfos there clarifies: "In journeying away from Mt. Sinai, they acted like children running away from the school house."

It is ironic that parshas Beha'aloscha always comes out at this time of year when we can most vividly appreciate the metaphor of the child counting the days on the calendar and looking at his watch, waiting for the school year to end! Go watch the kids rushing out of school on that last day of class. The metaphor will become crystal clear.

When learning this Gemara I was always bothered by the attribution of the pasuk "They journeyed away from the Mountain of Hashem" with the term "first punishment" (pironiyus). This might be accurately described as a sin, but where is the punishment? The second "pironiyus" is clear: The heavenly fire consuming at the edges of the camp was a punishment. But, apparently, there was not

a punishment for the sin of "running away from Har Sinai like a child running from the schoolhouse."

Rav Schwab asks this question and provides an answer. He says that running away from the Mountain of G-d without fully experiencing the impact of what was gained by having been in proximity to that mountain is itself the greatest punishment. The fact that a person could have achieved more and failed to achieve it is a self-inflicted punishment.

Likewise there may not be an independent Heavenly punishment for failing to properly enjoy the fulfillment of mitzvos -- whether it be the joy of the Shabbos experience or the uplifting feeling from fulfillment of any of a number of other commandments. However, the lack of experiencing that joy and uplifting is itself a tremendous punishment. It is a punishment that we bring upon ourselves by not properly contemplating and appreciating what we were given and what we have in G-d's mitzvos.

This insight can help us understand the urgent need to separate these two "punishments" with the section of the Ark's traveling. The immediately subsequent section begins with the words "And the people were k'mis-onen-nim". The word "mis-onen-nim" comes from the word 'onen' meaning a mourner. The people were mourning. What were they mourning about? The fact that they did not have meat!

"This is what should upset you? You are crying about the fact that you used to get 'free fish' in Egypt? When you left the Mountain of G-d, when you left the ability to learn Torah, you were not crying. You went out then with a smile! And now you are crying about the fact that you don't have steak to eat!"

This contrast compounds the sin and demonstrates the people's inconsistency. Therefore, this harsh juxtaposition of incidents needed to be separated by the section bracketed off by the upside down 'Nun's.

We set our own standards. We always need to ask ourselves "What makes me happy and what makes me sad? What excites me and what depresses me?"

Are we like the Jew who came to the Chidushei HaRim and was depressed because he didn't want to read about the sins of the Jewish people? Or are we in mourning because we do not have enough delicacies and luxuries to satisfy all of our gluttonous desires?

Homiletically, perhaps that this is why it was specifically the inverted letter 'Nun' which separates the inconsistent behavior of the two otherwise adjacent portions. The letter 'Nun' symbolizes 'Ne-emanus' -- Consistency (Faithful loyalty). The inverted 'Nun' symbolizes inconsistency. That in fact

was the sin represented by these two sections. It was easy to make them happy -- when they were running away from Mt. Sinai. On the other hand they easily became agitated and depressed if they did not have access to every luxury that they could imagine.

We must strive for consistency and we must strive to avoid the self-afflicting punishment of not appreciating becoming close to G-d through His Torah.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

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