

PARSHAS BEHAALOSCHA: COMPLAINTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

"Vayehi ha'om kemisonenim - and the people took to seeking complaints" (Bamidbar 11:1)

Even a simple reading of the parshiyos of Bamidbar leaves one struggling to understand the perplexing string of complaints leveled by the Bnei Yisroel against Moshe Rabbeinu. Shortly after being recipients of a miraculous deliverance from Mitzrayim, the splitting of the Sea and accepting the Torah, they took to complaining about the manna - the Heavenly Bread, the lack of meat, and mourned the unflattering report of most of the meraglim (spies).

How do we understand this lack of gratitude to Hashem and Moshe Rabbeinu - especially coming so soon after the incredible miracles they witnessed?

THE MEANING OF THE WORD MISONENIM

The Torah introduces the topic of the complaints of the Jews by describing them as "misonenim." The loose translation of this word would perhaps be "complainers." However, this is not a word used often in the Torah, and many meforshim attempt to explain the exact meaning of misonenim in the context of this phase in the development of the B'nei Yisroel - as they expressed their unhappiness to Moshe.

â€¢ Rashi explains misonen (singular of misonenim) as similar to â€˜misLonen', which would mean â€˜aliyah' a [baseless] complaint.

â€¢ The Rashbam explains that the Jews were in pain from the difficult journey and were therefore complaining about various aspects of logistics of their travels. This seems to be a more sympathetic view of the B'nei Yisroel.

â€¢ The Ibn Ezra feels that the word misonen is similar to an ovon' - a spiritual misdeed (in this case, the aleph and ayin would be exchanged, as the Ibn Ezra notes another instance of this in Navi). Hence, the Jews sinned by complaining to Moshe.

THE TRANSLATION OF THE KLI YAKAR

I would like to focus this week's Torah Thought on the interpretation of the Kli Yakar. He maintains that the term â€˜misonenim' comes from the word onen, describing one who has just heard about the death of an immediate relative.

According to this explanation, the Jews were â€˜mourning' the fact that they were now restricted from

many previously acceptable activities now that they had received the Torah. Therefore, they were in a short-tempered mindset that produced the many complaints against Moshe.

A QUESTION

However, according to the Kli Yakar, why would the Torah not use the term 'aveil' instead of 'onen'? An aveil is a more general term for a mourner, one that is used to describe a person throughout the seven-day shivah period. The Torah could have said that the Jews were mourning in a more general sense, rather than use the specific term 'onen' that describes a person whose close relative has just died - and has not yet been buried.

A POSSIBLE ALTERNATE VIEW

I would humbly like to suggest another possible interpretation, one that would explain the background behind the litany of complaints against Moshe.

An onen is one who is in shock over the death of a relative. He or she has not had the time to properly process this information and deal with the event that has just occurred. That is one of the reasons that halacha relieves the onen from the performance of any mitzvos during this short period of emotional overload.

A RAPID TRANSITION

The B'nei Yisroel went from being slaves who were mired in the depravity of Egypt to dizzying spiritual heights in a very short period of time. They saw the presence of Hashem at the Sea and received the Torah. They were also showered with material blessings during that period of time, leaving with the spoils of Egypt and collecting the gold from the Egyptian troops after the Splitting of the Sea.

I would like to suggest that as the Torah begins the tragic chapter of the complaints of the Jews to Moshe, an introductory and explanatory note is mentioned.

"Vayehi ha'om kemisonenim." The nation was similar to mourners - on the opposite side of the spectrum. Just as a mourner is in a state of shock by the sudden death of a loved one, so too, the Jews in the desert were stunned by their meteoric rise from penniless slaves to a prosperous group of noble men and women who were given the sacred mission of becoming Hashem's Chosen People.

INSTANT MILLIONAIRES

It is interesting to note that Hashem had to plead with Moshe (Shemos 11:1, see Rashi) to instruct the Jews to take the gold and silver from the Egyptians - in order to keep His promise to Avrohom. Many meforshim (commentaries) explain that Moshe was concerned that the sudden riches would be harmful to the spiritual well being of the B'nei Yisroel.

A study was recently conducted on lottery winners - five and ten years after they had won million-dollar-plus jackpots. A shocking percentage of the people reported that their lives had disintegrated. It happened too quickly, they said, and they simply were not prepared to deal with their great fortune. It was like a thirsty person drinking from a fire hydrant with the water running full force.

The B'nei Yisroel were severely punished for their complains and for their lack of gratitude to Moshe. But, as a loving Father, Hashem may be pointing out a possible defense for His children by explaining that they were âk' misonenim' - like people who were adjusting rapidly to a new reality.

SOME RAMIFICATIONS

Every parsha in our Holy Torah has important lessons to impart to us. These critical parshiyos are certainly no exception. One of them may be the importance of yishuv hada'as (thoughtful reflection) as we change and develop.

As we transition from adolescence to adulthood, we form our identities and develop our core values. Often that means change - hopefully all for the better. Even in the case of spiritual growth, however, yishuv hada'as is required. All too often, very rapid changes and improvements that are too much too fast do not withstand the test of time.

ACQUIRING A REBBI OR MORAH

It is of such importance to find - and maintain an ongoing relationship with - one's parents and a spiritual mentor. As we grow and develop there are so many challenges and issues with which we need guidance .

Getting ongoing hadrocha (direction) from your parents and a rebbi or morah is an excellent way of seeing to it that your growth will be measured - and sustained.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos

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