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Parshat HaShavua   
Yeshivat Har Etzion

**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**PARASAHAT VA-ETCHANAN**

**Hope and Defeat - Moshe's Supplication**

**By Yaacov Steinman**

The opening section of Parashat Va-etchanan - the supplication of Moshe - poses numerous questions for the reader. Actually, the Abrabanel opens his discussion of the parasha with twenty-seven questions, but we will settle, at least for now, with only six.

1. Why is this incident related now, if, as seems logical (as the Ibn Ezra contends), it took place soon after the incident at Mei Meriva, when God told Moshe that he would not be entering the land?

2. If, alternatively, Moshe offered this prayer after the victory over Sichon and Og (see Rashi), why did Moshe only ask God to cancel the punishment then? The verse emphasizes, in fact, that "I pleaded before God, AT THAT TIME, saying."

3. In either case, why is the prayer not related in its proper place in Sefer Bemidbar, rather than here, as part of Moshe's speech to the Jews on the plains of Moav?

4. The introduction to Moshe's prayer is, "HaShem Elokim, You have commenced to show Your servant Your greatness and Your mighty hand; for what god is there in the heavens or the earth who can match Your deeds or Your mighty actions." How is this a fitting prelude to Moshe's request to enter the land? What is the connection between God's greatness and Moshe's yearning to cross the river and see the land?

5. Why is God's refusal not explained in any way? God not only rejects Moshe's request, He tells Moshe not to ask again! What is the meaning of this curt denial?

6. Why does the section end with the statement, "And we camped in the valley, opposite Ba'al Pe'or?"

Our first task is to determine which time is "that time." Rashi makes the obvious assumption and places "that time" immediately after the occurrences of the previous verses - the military victories over Sichon and Og, the two kings who blocked the Jew's advance to the Jordan river from the east (2,31-3,22). Rashi explains:

"At that time: After I captured the land of Sichon and Og, I imagined that perhaps the decree had been annulled."

God's decree against Moshe was that he would not lead the Jews into the promised land. Moshe sees that he has succeeded in leading the Jews into the land of Sichon and Og, which is, in effect, annexed (given to the 2 1/2 tribes, as detailed at the end of last week's parasha) to the Land of Israel. This gives rise to the hope that perhaps, without telling him, God has changed His mind.

There are primarily two difficulties with this explanation. Firstly, there is really no reason to consider the land of Sichon and Og to be the "promised land" which God has declared to be off-bounds to Moshe. The land of Israel, as promised by God, was specifically bounded by the Jordan river (in Parashat Masei, Num. 34, AFTER they have already defeated Sichon and Og). Even as they camp on the plains of Moav, after the battle with Sichon and Og, both God and Moshe speak to the Jews as being ABOUT to enter the promised land. While the EVENTUAL halakhic status of the Transjordan, after the Land had been conquered, is an interesting topic (it is considered to be part of the Land of Israel, with certain legal exceptions), there seems to be no question in the Torah that it was not the land "promised to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaacov," but was at best annexed to that land after the completion of the conquest. The war that Moshe fought was in principle no different than other battles fought in the desert, against Amalek (Ex. 18), and the Canaanites of Arad (Num. 21).

Secondly, if Moshe indeed thinks that he has already crossed the line demarcating the promised land from the desert, why does he "beseech?" Either the decree has already been repealed, in which case there is no problem, or it has not, in which case there is no cause for optimism at all. The verb for "beseech" (etchanan), is a very strong one, and is connected by the Sages with a root meaning "unmerited" (chinam), as it represents an appeal to God's mercy without any basis in merit or even logic.

The Ramban and others solve this problem by reinterpreting "at that time." They explain that it refers to a PREVIOUS time, namely, immediately after God's decree (forty years earlier). This neatly explains the timing of the prayer of Moshe, but strengthens the second question we asked above - why is Moshe mentioning this now in his speech? If we examine the occurrence of the phrase "at that time," this explanation becomes extremely difficult.

This phrase, "at that time," is repeated a number of times in Moshe's speech. The first time was at the very beginning of the speech (1,9). It appears again in 1,18. The previous two times were just a few verses before our parasha, both clearly referring to after the war with Sichon and Og (3,18 and 3,21 - read the verses and continue into our parasha without stopping). There are other "timemarks" throughout Parashat Devarim (1,46; 2,13-14; 2,16). We get a clear impression that Moshe is very carefully laying out the sequence of events, emphasizing that each event followed the previous one, and placing different "sayings" of his within the framework of the great political events of the era. If you have a series of events, each prefaced either with an indicator that it took place after a certain period of time, or "at that time," it seems clear that the chronological order is not only being preserved but is being emphasized. The conclusion is that the prayer of Moshe took place after the battles of Sichon and Og, as Rashi stated.

This is further strengthened by the opening of Moshe's prayer - and here we see the importance of noticing the exact choice of words in the Torah. Moshe states, "You have COMMENCED to show Your servant Your greatness and Your mighty hand...." The verb for "commenced" is "hachilota," not a particularly common form in the Torah. Just a few verses previously, before the onset of the battle against Sichon, God had said to Moshe, "See, I have begun (hachiloti) to give Sichon and his country to you..." (3,31). The parallelism between the two is clear - the war with Sichon was a commencement of the manifestation of God's greatness, and this is the object of Moshe's praise at the beginning of this week's parasha. And so, the question returns - what is the connection between the victories over Sichon and Og, which take place OUTSIDE of Eretz Yisrael, and Moshe's request that he be permitted to enter the land?

I think that if we read Rashi carefully, we will get a clue to understanding the connection between the successful war with Sichon and Og and Moshe's expressed hope to enter the Land of Israel. Rashi believes that the war with Sichon and Og is not a LOGICAL but a PSYCHOLOGICAL reason for Moshe's prayer. Logically, the argument is rather weak, as we explained. But psychologically, a military victory on the very borders of the Land of Israel cannot but raise Moshe's spirits, re-igniting his hopes to somehow complete the mission of his life. Rashi wrote that Moshe "imagined" that the decree had been lifted. I think the choice of verbs here is deliberate and indicates less than a rational thought process. To convert this irrational hope into reality requires "beseeching," something that Moshe perhaps would not have done had not the taste of the land been so strongly felt on his lips as he began to engage in the very same activity that would be required to conquer all of the land.

In order to understand this point fully, we must remember the point of the opening sections of Sefer Devarim. This is not a narrative. The important events of the forty-year sojourn in the desert have been related in Shemot and Bemidbar. Sefer Devarim is a SPEECH, a farewell oration of Moshe. Whatever is related here must be understood primarily in light of the lesson Moshe is trying to convey, the message he seeks to impart to the Jews as they are on the verge of crossing the Jordan to begin fulfilling the Jewish destiny - a crossthey will do without him. If this prayer of Moshe was not importenough to mention in Bemidbar, why does Moshe relate it here?

I think Moshe is describing a common human tendency, the "things-are-going-my-way" syndrome. He turns to God, and does not merely say, "You have commenced to conquer the land," but "You have commenced to SHOW YOUR SERVANT Your greatness and Your mighty hand." The emphasis is not merely on what God has done, but on what this has meant to Moshe. Moshe is admitting that the impetus for his request of God is the overwhelming feeling of being swept up by the greatness and might of God's conquering hand which was manifest in the victories over Sichon and Og. A great upheaval of history has begun, victory is so thick it can be tasted, and the Jews, with God before them, are "on a roll." Moshe is caught up in that feeling. It is human nature to believe that at such a time, nothing can go wrong. This, of course, is not a rational argument. There is no connection between the victories of Sichon and Og and the punishment of Moshe. But psychologically, it is hard to believe that just now, when the smell of the Land is already on the breath of the wind, that precisely now when after forty years the historical destiny of the Jews is on the march, that at "THAT TIME" Moshe will suffer his greatest defeat.

Moshe is saying, simply: If You have commenced to let me participate in these great victories, in the mighty uplifting spirit, then I should also keep going. It is striking that Moshe does not address God's refusal; he does not say, "Let me go over the Jordan," but merely proposes, "I shall cross over the Jordan." The feeling we get is that he is saying, "If I have come this far, it is natural that I shall cross over."

We now understand both the timing of the request after the victories, and the phrasing of Moshe's introduction not so much in terms of the victories themselves as in terms of "Your greatness and Your mighty hand; for what god is there in the heavens or the earth who can match Your deeds or Your mighty actions." The entire world, God's world, is marching to victory. A sensitive ear can almost hear the background music to this introduction, a swelling crescendo of majesty, a mighty victory march. If that is the spirit of the times, Moshe cannot imagine himself being left out. The conclusion - "I shall cross over and see the good land which is over the Jordan" - follows naturally, and, more importantly, expectantly.

God's answer is striking in its curtness. "Enough, do not continue to speak to Me more of this matter." Having understood the true basis of Moshe's request, God does not repeat the metaphysical basis for His decree, the sin of Moshe at Mei Meriva. The very request is OUT OF PLACE. Why? Not because it is wrong to beseech God for mercy (which Moshe has not done). Nor is it improper to try and convince God to reverse His mind (for which Moshe offers no reasons and no arguments, as he famously does when arguing for Israel after the sins of the golden calf and the spies). But the implied psychological basis of the request here represents a distortion of true belief and undermines the relationship which a servant of God has to have with his Creator. God is not a force, a trend, a blind power of fate. There are no "rolls" in Divine history. There are no winds of fate which man has to catch. History is not a giant wheel which follows inevitable turns and man merely has to try and catch it on an upturn. Such a belief is akin to magic, to sorcery, with its belief in brute spiritual forces which can be, in the first case, manipulated, and in the second predicted and utilized (as Bil'am tried to do and failed). Moshe's failure to enter the Land is due solely to the moral nature of his relationship with God, and has nothing to due with whether it is a favorable time in history or not. The fact that Moshe has witnessed the visible revelation of God's glory does not change the fact that God has decreed that his personal fate is not to enter the promised land. No matter what happened yesterday, no matter how glorious the victory of the Jewish people and of God Himself, today's fate is totally dependent on the individual's relationship with God, on sin and merit.

This now explains why Moshe is relating this incident. There is a message here, a lesson. This section is part of Moshe's last instructions, warning the Jews and educating them. Remember, he is saying, no matter what the course of history will be, every one of you will be judged by his individual merit. You have to nurture your personal relationship with God and not imagine that the general trend will bring you success. In the words of a verse soon to be read:

Your eyes see that which God has done at Ba'al Pe'or, for God destroyed from your midst every man who walked after Ba'al Pe'or. But you, who cleaved unto HaShem your God, are living, every one of you, today. (4,3)

This explains the enigmatic conclusion to this section. "And we camped in the valley, opposite Ba'al Pe'or" (3,29). First of all, it is not at all clear why a geographic place-card is appropriate here, after Moshe's prayer. Even more difficult is the actual description of this place. The location of the Jews' camp is repeatedly described as "the Plains of Moav." It is clearly a mountainous area, overlooking the Jordan valley opposite Jericho. Why is it here described as a valley, and why is the gratuitous reference to Ba'al Pe'or thrown in?

I would suggest that this is a metaphoric summation of the message of Moshe in this section. You are camped, he tells the people, in a valley amidst the mountains. No matter where you think you are, you are never "on top of the mountain." In order to proceed, you must always climb. What is more, opposite you at all times must be the vision of Ba'al Pe'or, your nemesis - the possibility of sin. Between you and a successful crossing of the Jordan lies Ba'al Pe'or as a silent testament to what can prevent the crossing - sin, transgression, betrayal of God. I imagined that we were poised for a natural swoop into Israel, which would carry me along with it, but we are in a valley, and Ba'al Pe'or looms large before us. And so it should be, for you must always remember Ba'al Pe'or and never take God's mighty hand for granted as though it were a force which you have harnessed to your own carriage.

This is the meaning of the advice which Moshe immediately gives the Jewish people, beginning with chapter 4. If you will live and inherit the land, you must obey the mitzvot exactly, without adding or subtracting anything (4,1-2). Even at this point, nothing is guaranteed. It is still possible not to enter the land. Furthermore, if you want to know the meaning of Jewish destiny, it is not in power and inevitable victory. Two things stand out in the character of the Jewish people:

For it is your wisdom and intelligence in the eyes of the peoples, who will hear all these laws and say: This great nation is a wise and intelligent people.

For who is this great nation which has God close to it, as is HaShem our God whenever we call to Him;

And who is this great nation, which has such just laws and ordinances, as are in this Torah which I am giving you today (4,6-8).

The greatness of Israel, the force behind its victories, is not national destiny but the Torah and the relationship with God. So that there should be no doubt, Moshe subsequently states it explicitly - even after you enter the land, should you abandon God, you will "surely be destroyed from upon the land to which you are crossing the Jordan to inherit...." (4,26; read the entire section 4,25-40, which is the end of this first part of Moshe's speech).

The last verse is taken from the reading of Tish'a Be-Av. Taking God for granted, relying on God's investment in His Temple and counting on the fact that a defeat for God's people is unthinkable, were the basis for the perverse Jewish confidence in the days before the destruction of the first Temple (read Yirmiyahu). May we speedily merit God's return to Zion, "For HaShem your God is a merciful God; He shall not weaken you nor destroy you, nor shall He fothe covenant with your fathers, which He swore them" (4,31).

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