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Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Beha'alotekha

The Whispering Campaign

Our sedra gives us three puzzling vignettes, back to back. *Bemidbar* chapter 11 begins:

“*Vay'hee ha'am k'mithon'neem, ra b'oznei Hashem...* And the people were like murmurers, evil in the ears of the Lord. The Lord heard and His anger was kindled. The fire of the Lord burned amongst them, and devoured (those) at the boundary of the encampment.” (*Bemidbar* 11:1)

Curious, as generally when such devouring fires issue forth, action and consequence occur near the center of the camp. Also, when the people complained, how was it that the murmurs were heard by God, but perhaps not by Moshe? Further, the actual complaint is not recorded.

In a curiously connected report in verses 4 and 5, we have more complaints.

“*V'hasaphsuf asher b'qirbo...* and the ‘mixed multitude’ that was among them had craved cravings; and the children of Israel returned to weeping, saying: Who will provide us meat to eat! We remember the fish, which we would eat in Egypt for nothing (*chinam*); the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic...And Moshe heard the people weeping.

The ‘*asaphsuf*’, frequently rendered ‘mixed multitude’, is a puzzler. So, too, the complaint of the Children of Israel: first, they ask for meat, but then ‘fondly’ remember the fish and vegetables they ate ‘for free’ in Egypt. What does ‘free’ mean here? The Israelites were slaves! At the end of the chapter, God’s anger is again kindled against the People, and God strikes those who lusted and the meat-eaters, all the People, with a very great plague.

So ends chapter 11. Chapter 12 starts with yet another curious vignette. Miryam and Aaron speak against Moshe, first regarding Moshe’s Kushite wife, though the specific issue is not mentioned. Then, they turn around and raise a complaint that can really be taken only as criticizing Moshe as arrogant: “Has the Lord indeed spoken only through Moshe? Has he not also spoken through us?” God hears (as in the first vignette) and God’s anger is kindled against Miryam and Aaron (as in both previous vignettes). Here though, only Miryam is punished, and even so, only with *tsara`at*, not death. Why is only Miryam punished? And why is the punishment not death?

The phrase ‘*yichar aph*’, rendered, ‘anger was kindled’ when applied to God with respect to the `Am, the People, appears in *Sh'mot* 32 (the Golden Calf), *Bemidbar* 25 (Ba'al Peor), and foretold in *Devarim* 6, 7, 11 and 29. In each of these instances, idolatry is the relevant

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transgression. In our sedra, the anger of the Lord is kindled against the people, but idolatry is not clearly the transgression. Our sedra appears to be the only outlier in this pattern, though Moshe applies the phrase ‘*yichar aph*’ to God when recounting in *Bemidbar* 32 the incident of the Spies (*Bemidbar* 14). Rambam (Guide for the Perplexed 1.36) would have us categorize all such usages of this phrase applied to the People as caused by the sin of idolatry. How are we to understand Rambam’s required classification?

In the second passage we’ve studied, the phrase ‘*zakharnu et haddaga asher nokhal b’mitsrayim chinam*’ – we remember the fish, which we would eat in Egypt for nothing’ certainly could use some unpacking. What is this ‘*chinam*’, generally rendered ‘for free’, or ‘for nothing’? [*Sinat Chinam* - baseless or causeless hatred, is a phrase with which we are all familiar, unfortunately.] What is the ‘*chinam*’ of our verse meant to inform? Yoma 75a would interpret *chinam* here as free from the obligations of mitzvot. *Sifre Bemidbar* 67 is explicit in this regard, that ‘*chinam*’ in this verse is to be understood as ‘free from the commandments’. God’s anger is kindled against the people, for an act signifying a desire to shake off the yoke of Torah. The implication of Rambam’s classification is staggering.

Whispering Campaign: (idiomatic) A method of persuasion in which damaging rumors are deliberately spread concerning a person, while the source of the rumors tries to avoid detection.

In our third passage, the exact subject of Miryam’s calumny is almost immaterial. That Miryam could be criticizing Moshe for separating from his wife, on account of concerns over ritual purity *vis a vis* a perceived requirement for prophesy, well, that would be a textbook example of *lashon harah*. Onqelos’s understanding of the word ‘Kushite’ as ‘beautiful’ is in consonance with Chazal’s interpretation of Miryam’s actions as in sympathy with a neglected wife, as the excuse for this criticism. On the other hand, the possibility that Miryam is exhibiting color-consciousness would be even worse. What is curious and quite material is that it is clear from the language that Miryam was the primary speaker of the first complaint (*vat’daber*, not *vay’dabru*), and that it was God, not Moshe, that ‘heard’ (parallel to the first passage).

Onomatopoeia: a word that imitates (or suggests the source of) the sound that it describes.

So now, what do we make of the ‘*asaphsaph*’? The difficulties with identifying *asaphsaph* as ‘elders’, ‘strangers’, ‘foreigners’ has been dealt with elsewhere¹ and need not be repeated here. We merely must construct an alternative hypothesis. For that, though, we have really no guidance from *Tanakh* itself, for this is an example of a ***hapax legomenon***, a word that appears in *Tanakh* only this once, so no contextual hints as to its meaning may be drawn from other instances. The word itself is perhaps a quadrilateral, with a root *samekh-peh-samekh-peh*. ‘*Saph-saph*’. Even if not, it is still very similar to such words as

<i>gimgum</i> (גמגום) stuttering	<i>tzichtzoach</i> (צחצוח) polishing
<i>tiphtooth</i> (טיפטוף) dripping	<i>shifshoof</i> (שיפשוף) rubbing, and of course
<i>baqbooq</i> (בקבוק) a bottle (what is the sound of liquid pouring from a bottle?)	

¹ *Destination Torah*, Isaac S.D. Sassoon, pp 221-223

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We've a word in English – “susurratio”: the sound of whispering – perhaps the very word used to label these miscreants is itself an onomatopoeia?

The pattern begins to come together. These three vignettes, though not a re-telling of the same story, use several similar devices to tie them together. In the first passage, no one really spoke out loud, and the complaint itself was so immaterial it wasn't even recorded. It was those who were not central to the camp, those on the ‘outskirts,’ who bore the brunt of God's kindled anger. These, perhaps, were the people on the edge, whispering. Whatever they were whispering, it was evil enough to warrant death. In the second, the *asaphsuph*, the whisperers, goaded the People into their weeping. The People's complaints themselves seem logically unconnected, as if the first was merely a pretext for the second. In their complaint, however, they rebel against God, throwing off the yoke of Torah in a baseless act of disloyalty. God's anger is kindled, yet the worse punishment seems to be attached to the whisperers. In the third and final passage, Miryam goads Aaron with a primary complaint that seems unspecific as to its nature (parallel to the first vignette) and unconnected to the secondary (parallel to the second vignette). The secondary complaint does itself smack of an act of disloyalty against Moshe, the most humble of men, though it is God who seems to take it personally. And who is punished? It is Miryam, the whisperer, the instigator.

Let us now try to understand the severity of God's response in the first two passages. The third is easily understood as a lesson against one of several possible variations of *lashon hara*; Chazal and later commentators all seem quite comfortable with *tsara'at* as the appropriate punishment. Miryam as the whispering instigator gives us a key to understanding the first two. (Perhaps as a tool to strengthen the connection between the second and third passages, Scripture uses as a play on words the root *asph*, gather, to describe how Miryam is to return to the camp after her seven-day exile, instead of several more natural words, e.g., ‘return’, ‘enter’, ‘come in’.) Rambam would have us interpret these first two passages as instances of idolatry. How so? Our other clue is the Report of the Spies. A principle message of the spies was God's implied inability to see the People of Israel successfully through the settlement of Canaan. Indeed, echoes of ‘Who can provide us meat’ are heard. The message is clear. Denying the omnipotence of God, ‘shorting his hand’ and through that pretext seeking to divest oneself of the yoke of Torah is no other sin than that of idolatry. Underhanded disloyalty towards Moshe is bad enough to warrant *tsara'at*. Whispering others into disloyalty towards God will surely bring the severest consequences as the instigation of idolatry.

There is no middle ground between the genuine faith of Caleb and Yehoshua and the rebellious idolatry of the spies, whisperers and goaders. Ours is to choose the path of genuine faith and loyalty to Torah.

Shabbat Shalom!

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