

Parashat Behaalotecha 5775, 2015:

Who Were the מְתַאֲוֵנִים (the Complainers)?

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, HaRav Yosef Shemuel ben HaRav Reuven Aharon, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world..

The people were looking to complain (מְתַאֲוֵנִים), and it was evil in the ears of the L-rd. The L-rd heard and His anger flared, and a fire from the L-rd burned among them, consuming the extremes of the camp. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 11:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaic Press Complete Tanach*).

One of the exegetical challenges in our *pasuk* (verse) is ascertaining the identity of the complainers (מְתַאֲוֵנִים). What was the essence of their protest? What were they attempting to achieve? Rashi (1040-1105), citing the first explanation in *Midrash Sifrei Bamidbar* 85, suggests the following:

Were looking to complain: [The term] מְתַאֲוֵנִים denotes a pretext. They were seeking a pretext to turn away from the Omnipresent. Similarly, it says regarding Samson, “that he sought a pretext (תִּאֲוָה)” (*Sefer Shoftim* 14:4)

According to Rashi, the מְתַאֲוֵנִים were “were seeking a pretext to turn away from the Omnipresent,” as they wanted to rebel against Him, and sought to justify their behavior by publicizing their excuse.

The second interpretation of the *Sifrei* is that of Rabbi Eliezer. In his estimation, the מְתַאֲוֵנִים were provocateurs:

The only explanation for “מְתַאֲוֵנִים” is provocateurs. As it states in the verse: “Words of a grumbler are those of dissenters, and they penetrate the innermost parts of the body.” (*Sefer Mishle* 26:22, translation with my emendation) The text also states: “You murmured in your tents” (*Sefer Devarim* 1:27) – [this means] they were provocateurs ...”

Thus, Rabbi Eliezer maintains that מְתַאֲוֶנְנִים refers to those who desired purposely and consciously to provoke Hashem through their words and strategy.

Rabbi Yehudah's explanation of our term, as found in the *Sifrei*, seems to suggest that these individuals sickened themselves spiritually as a result of their baseless complaints:

The only explanation of מְתַאֲוֶנְנִים is *k'm'davim et atzmam* (those who sicken themselves). As the Torah states: "I did not eat any of it [second tithe] while in my mourning (*b'oni*), nor did I consume any of it while unclean; neither did I use any of it for the dead." (*Sefer Devarim* 26:14)

Rabbi Yehudah's exposition is based upon the etymological connection (i.e. the shared Hebrew letters) between מְתַאֲוֶנְנִים and אֲוֵי (mourning). This is the case, since the latter term is reflective of the diminished spiritual status of the mourner due to the heart-wrenching pain and existential crisis associated with the loss of a loved one.

The final analysis of our phrase, as found in the *Sifrei*, is that of the editor of the Mishnah, Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi. Rather than reading the beginning of our source *pasuk* as, "The people were looking to complain, and it was evil in the ears of the L-rd," he construes our verse as stating, "The people were complaining in an evil manner in the ears of the L-rd." Thus, in his view, the word "evil" modifies complaining, instead of standing purely on its own. To what does this "evil manner" refer? Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi states: "The only explanation of evil (*rah*) is idol worship." He bases this statement on a verse found in *Sefer Devarim*: "For I know that after my death, you will surely become corrupted, and deviate from the way which I had commanded you. Consequently, the evil [i.e. punishment] will befall you at the end of days, because you did evil (*rah*) in the eyes of the L-rd, to provoke Him to anger through the work of your

hands [constructing idols].” (31:29, brackets my own) Clearly, for Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi, the goal of the מְתַאֲוֵנְנִים was nothing less than to reject Hashem and embrace *avodah zarah* (idol worship).

In sum, the *Sifrei* presents four explanations as to the identity of the מְתַאֲוֵנְנִים:

1. Instigators who desired to publicly libel Hashem with their pretexts so the people would reject Him (Anonymous)
2. Provocateurs (Rabbi Eliezer)
3. Those who spiritually sickened themselves, and we may surmise, others (Rabbi Yehudah)
4. Those who fomented a movement to embrace *avodah zarah* (Rabbi Yehudah Hanasi)

The Ramban (Nachmanides, 1194-1270) forges an entirely new interpretive path in his explanation of the מְתַאֲוֵנְנִים:

These people spoke from the bitterness of their souls when they performed any challenging task (*hakoavim*). This was evil in the eyes of Hashem since they should have followed Him in joy and with gladness of heart, based upon the abundance of goodness He had bestowed upon them. [Instead,] they acted like they were captives devoid of choice, who could do nothing other than complain and murmur about their situation. (Translation and brackets my own)

I believe the Ramban is teaching us a very profound lesson. The מְתַאֲוֵנְנִים engaged in *kafui tovah*, rejection of the good that Hashem had done for them. For these individuals, pessimism reigned supreme and virtually nothing that the Almighty had done, or would do for them, could lift them up from their spiritual abyss. In short, they had given up all hope.

In stark contrast to the מְתַאֲוֵנְנִים, one of our tasks in life is to recognize the unceasing *chane, chesed v'rachamim* (favor, kindness and mercy) that our Creator extends to us,

and place our eternal hope in Him. Therefore, we proclaim in each *Shemoneh Esrei* (Silent Prayer):

We shall thank You and relate Your praise – for our lives, which are committed to Your power and for our souls that are entrusted to You; for Your miracles that are with us every day; and for Your wonders and favors in every season – evening, morning, and afternoon. The Beneficent One, for Your compassions were never exhausted and the Compassionate One, for Your kindness never ended – always have we put our hope in You. (Translation, *Artscroll Siddur*, underlining my own)

Truly, and to quote the *Siddur* once again, “*Ashreinu mah tov chelkeinu u'mah na'im goraleinu*” (“we are joyous in our portion [possession from G-d] and the pleasantness of our lot [as His chosen people]”). *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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