

Parashat Behaalotecha 5774, 2014:

*Rabbi Soloveitchik's Analysis of Kivrot HaTa'avah (The Graves of Desire)*

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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, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka.

On June 10, 1974, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993, known as “the Rav”) gave a now-famous public lecture on our *parasha* that focused upon the multifaceted aspects of authentic Jewish leadership. At the outset of his presentation, he noted the two main problems of our Torah portion. The first deals with the difficulties inherent in a general understanding of many of the events in our *sidrah*:

The paper won't be restricted to the *sidrah* of, Behaalotecha, which is one of the most difficult *sidrot* in the entire Chumash. The *Sidrah* of Behaalotecha is very puzzling. It is puzzling for two reasons. First, certain events described in the *sidrah* are incomprehensible. We simply cannot grasp the etiology of these events - nor their teleology...

(This and all transcriptions, Yitzchak Etshalom, with my emendations to enhance readability, [www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/5762/bm/rov.leadership.pdf](http://www.torah.org/advanced/mikra/5762/bm/rov.leadership.pdf))

The Rav's second major challenge in understanding our *parasha* deals specifically with Moshe's unprecedented reaction to our ancestor's behavior at *Kivrot haTa'avah* (The Graves of Unfettered Desire):

There is a second difficulty. Moshe went through many crises. He lived through many distressful experiences and moments. And worst of all, as you know, was the *Egel* (Golden Calf) experience, which threatened to terminate the very relationship between G-d and Israel. Yet, he never panicked, never complained, never acted out of black despair. On the contrary, steadfastly and heroically, he petitioned the Almighty for forgiveness; defending the people, arguing their case like an attorney in court... Suddenly, in our *sidrah*, Moshe began to complain. When the multitude began to rebel, Moshe, instead of defending the people, began to complain, almost accusing the people. He said things that he had never before uttered.

How did the Torah encapsulate Moshe's response to our forebear's behavior? The Rav cited the following poignant passage:

Moses said to the L-rd, "Why have You treated Your servant so badly? Why have I not found favor in Your eyes that You place the burden of this entire people upon me? Did I conceive this entire people? Did I give birth to them, that You say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as the nurse carries the suckling,' to the Land You promised their forefathers? Where can I get meat to give all these people? For they are crying to me, saying, 'Give us meat to eat.' Alone I cannot carry this entire people for it is too hard for me. If this is the way You treat me, please kill me if I have found favor in Your eyes, so that I not see my misfortune." (*Sefer Bamidbar* 11:11-15, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

At first glance, Moshe's reaction seems to be out of proportion to our ancestor's behavior, since it appears all they did was cry at the entrance to their tents: "Moses heard the people weeping with their families, each one at the entrance to his tent. The L-rd became very angry, and Moses considered it evil." (*Ibid.* , 11:10) Rav Soloveitchik formulated this idea in the following fashion:

They didn't do anything else, no crime, no idolatry, no murder, no sexual promiscuity, no robbery, no burglary - nothing, they just were overcome by a desire and they wept that's all - they didn't yell, they didn't throw stones at Moshe, like they did in other situations. Nothing, they didn't say anything, they weren't threatening anyone, just complaining...

Yet, there was an event that eventuated in Moshe's powerful response to the Generation of the Desert, namely, the people's whimpering and entreaty: "Give us meat to eat." At first glance this seems like a rather innocuous request. One could easily interpret their desire in the following manner: The people had been eating manna and were looking for a change, something different to eat, something to which they had become accustomed in the past. After all, what would have been wrong with a little meat to augment their heavenly diet?

As in most narrative portions of the Torah, however, there is far more here than initially meets the eye. The meat in this instance was actually a metaphor for the people's desire to return to the open-ended and uncontrolled kind of physical relationships they had engaged in during their exile in Egypt. In short, they wanted to return to their pagan-like lifestyle where everything is permitted and nothing is forbidden. Rashi's (1040-1105) explanation of the people's weeping underscores this idea:

**Weeping with their families:** Families gathered in groups weeping so as to publicize their grievance. Our Sages say that the meaning is: "concerning family matters," that is, because intermarriage among family members was forbidden to them. — [Midrash Sifrei Behaalotecha 1:42:10, Talmud Bavli, Yoma 75a, underlining my own]

Our ancestors demonstrated their most pagan-like behavior, however, once they were given the *slav*, the quail:

A wind went forth from the Lord and swept quails from the sea and spread them over the camp about one day's journey this way and one day's journey that way, around the camp, about two cubits above the ground. The people rose up all that day and all night and the next day and gathered the quails. [Even] the one who gathered the least collected ten heaps. They spread them around the camp in piles. (*Sefer Bamidbar*, 11:31-32)

The Rav explained that:

They were mad with desire, there was no controlling/limiting element in their desire for vastness, the imagination excited them and their good sense was surrounded with a nimbus which was irresistible, "the more, the better, and you start gathering new goods even before you have completed gathering the other goods." The pagan is impatient and insatiable. That 's what the Torah describes in *Kivrot haTa'avah*. (Underlining my own)

What are the hallmarks of the pagan lifestyle? Why did Hashem and Moshe react so forcefully to this behavior? Here, too, we can turn to Rav Soloveitchik's trenchant exposition:

In Chazal's [our Sages] opinion, an *Avodah Zarah*-worshipper [idol worshipper] will also adopt the pagan way of life. But in this day and age, we know that it's possible for people to live like pagans even though no idolatry is involved. Paganism is not the worship of an idol, it encompasses more - a certain style of life. What is the pagan way of life, in contradistinction to the Torah way of life? The pagan cries for variety for boundlessness for unlimited lust and insatiable desire, the demonic dream of total conquest, of drinking the cup of pleasure to its dregs. The pagan way of life is the very antithesis of *Yahadut*

[Judaism], which demands limitedness of enjoyment and the ability to step backwards if necessary, the ability to withdraw - to retreat...When Man reaches out for the unreachable, for the orgiastic and hypnotic, then they don't violate the prohibition of *Avodah Zarah*, but they adopt the pagan way of life; and the Torah hated the pagan way of life more than it hated the idol. Because an idol cannot exist for a long time, it cannot last. Finally, an intelligent person realizes that it is just wood and metal; it has no life. *Avodah Zarah* per se is short-lived, however the pagan way of life has a tremendous attraction for people. (Brackets and underlining my own)

We are now in a position to accurately understand what really took place at *Kivrot HaTa'avah*, and, hence, appreciate Moshe's extreme response to those events. Quite simply, if left unchecked, *Kivrot HaTa'avah* would have resulted in the spiritual implosion of our people. The dreams and visions of our *Avot* and *Emahot* (Patriarchs and Matriarchs), and all of the Torah's values, would have been drowned in a tsunami of paganism. Moshe, therefore, reacted in the manner that the text so clearly describes, out of anguish for the future of Torah, Mitzvot, and the Jewish people. May this exposition of our *parasha* guide our actions, and protect our future generations. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

## Shabbat Shalom

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\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah* and Analysis," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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