

Parashat Beha'alotecha, 5778, 2018:

## *Why Did Moshe Despair?*

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, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, and HaRav Raphael ben HaRav Ephraim, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, Yekutiel Yehudah ben Pessel Lifsha, Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Tzvi Yoel ben Yocheved and Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* presents us with a very different kind of Moshe than we have encountered before. Instead of the brave advocate of the Jewish people and undaunted servant of Hashem, we are met with a morose and despondent Moshe on the cusp of complete capitulation:

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? ... 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* 11:11-12, 14-15, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

This passage stands in stark contrast to Moshe’s earlier reaction to the *Eigel Hazahav* (Golden Calf) incident, wherein he steadfastly arose to our nation’s defense:

Moses pleaded before the L-rd, his G-d, and said: “Why, O L-rd, should Your anger be kindled against Your people whom You have brought up from the land of Egypt with great power and with a strong hand? Why should the Egyptians say: ‘He brought them out with evil [intent] to kill them in the mountains and to annihilate them from upon the face of the earth?’ Retreat from the heat of Your anger and reconsider the evil [intended] for Your people.” The L-rd [then] reconsidered the evil He had said He would do to His people. (*Sefer Shemot* 32:11-12 and 14)

What can account for this radical change in Moshe’s emotional state? The answer, I believe, may be found in examining the context of each of these events. The *Eigel Hazahav* debacle is introduced by the verse:

When the people saw that Moses was late in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron, and they said to him: “Come on! Make us gods that will go before us, because this man Moses, who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we don't know what has become of him.” (*Sefer Shemot* 32:1)

Without a doubt, these are the words of a terrified people, who were steeped in a slave mentality acquired as a result of 210 years of Egyptian servitude. This negative psychological state affected every decision they made, even after having witnessed the wonders and miracles of the Exodus, the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds and the Revelation at Mount Sinai. At this point, they could not imagine going forward on their grand march to *Eretz Yisrael* without a physical presence in their midst, without a constant reminder that they had a leader literally before them. Their initial misguided goal to construct the *Eigel Hazahav*, therefore, had nothing to do with *avodah zarah* (idol worship) per se, and everything to do, instead, with reassuring themselves that their future as a nation was intact. Moshe recognized the extent of this deep psychological flaw unhesitatingly jumped to their rescue, begged Hashem, “Retreat from the heat of Your anger and reconsider the evil [intended] for Your people.”

Our *parasha*'s passage wherein Moshe declares, “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,” however, has an entirely different focus than that of the *Eigel Hazahav*. As our Sages make quite clear throughout Rabbinic literature, Moshe was repulsed by his people's uncontrollable desires for hedonistic pleasure:

But the multitude among them began to have strong cravings (*hitavu ta'avah*). Then even the children of Israel once again began to cry, and they said, “Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge, the cucumbers, the watermelons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.... Moses heard the people weeping with their families, each one at the entrance to his tent. The Lord became very angry, and Moses considered it evil. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 11:4-5)

Based upon various Midrashic and Talmudic sources, Rashi (1040-1105), in his *Commentary of the Torah*, notes that “free of charge” and “the people weeping with their families” are, in actuality, code words for rejecting the Torah’s precepts – particularly in the area of forbidden marriages (*ervah*). As a result, *Chazal* (our Sages of blessed memory) labelled this entire incident, “*Kivrot ha-Taavah*” (the Graves of Desire).

In a now celebrated June, 1974 public lecture, my rebbe, Rav Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), presented a penetrating analysis of the underlying attitude that prevailed at *Kivrot ha-Taavah*. His perceptions enable us to more fully comprehend Moshe’s reaction to our forebears’ behavior:

*Kivrot ha-Taavah* stemmed from a desire for a pagan way of life, with its insatiable desires, unlimited lusts, and complete absence of boundaries. This pagan lifestyle is the antithesis of Judaism, which demands self-discipline. The Torah, therefore, detests paganism because, unlike idolatry – the worship of a short-lived object of clay or metal – paganism is often infectious. (Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah, Rabbi Avishai C. David editor, page 300)

Armed with these insights, it is little wonder that “the L-rd became very angry, and Moses considered it evil,” for, in truth, *Kivrot ha-Taavah* was nothing less than a rebellion against the authority of the Torah and the Almighty Himself. Unfortunately, *Kivrot ha-Taavah* echoes until our own historical moment. Just as our ancestors in Egypt descended to the 49<sup>th</sup> level of impurity and absorbed the pagan standards of their depraved Egyptian society, so, too, are we relentlessly challenged by the adverse cultural norms that surround us. With Hashem’s help and our deepest desire, may we have the fortitude and conviction to guard ourselves against negative societal influences and, instead, wholeheartedly embrace the clarion call, “You shall be holy, for I, the L-rd, your G-d, am holy.” (*Sefer Vayikra* 19:2) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of [Rabbi Soloveitchik's](#) English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link.