

The Meaning of Marah

Beshalach 5783

I. From Yam Suf to Marah

With the likely exception of Matan Torah itself, the Providence manifest at Yam Suf stands alone within our tradition. Not lightly did Chazal tell us that the simple maidservant beheld prophetic visions at Yam Suf more than the greatest of our prophets did in moments of elevated spirituality.

The exultant exclamation, “*zeh keli v’anvehu elokei avi va’aromimenhu*,” bespeaking, in Midrashic terms, the intimacy of the Divine presence at that moment, to the point where, the very locus of the *shechina*, as it were, could be readily identified by all, denotes the wholly numinous nature of the experience.

All of this being said, the sudden transition from Yam Suf to Marah, over a period of only seventy two hours, is jarring in the extreme. After being saved by the waters, and witnessing the vengeance of the Almighty poured over their enemies in water, the people suddenly lack water itself. The deep conviction that the Almighty was directing events, and that Moshe was His faithful servant, “*va’ya’aminu Ba-Hashem u’vi’Moshe avdo*”, is replaced by bitter complaints against Moshe.

And yet, what is perhaps most fascinating about this entire section of the Torah is Chazal’s perception that Marah was not merely a place where a miracle occurred, and undrinkable waters were made potable, but a crucial stepping stone on the way to Sinai. Expounding on the clause, *sham sam lo chok u’mishpat, v’sham nisahu*, Chazal noted that not only were the Noahide laws reintroduced at Marah, but in conjunction with three other mitzvot, including Kibbud Av V’Eim, Shabbat, and, depending on various sources, elements of *dinim* or *parah adumah*.

In Chazal’s perception, Moshe’s response to the Jewish people’s thirsting for water was not only to provide for their physical needs, but equally, to provide them with spiritual sustenance. Not for nothing do Chazal note that another element borne out of the Marah experience was Moshe’s instituting *keriat ha-Torah* itself, so that the Jewish people would never go more than three days without imbibing the rejuvenating waters of Torah.

II. Rashi's Approach: Limud Ha'Torah

Operating, as usual, within the tradition of Chazal, Rashi understood that the mitzvot which were transmitted at Marah were the Shabbat, Parah Adumah, and dinim. As significant as the specific mitzvot which were being transmitted in this transitional phase leading to Sinai, Rashi notes that the point of this transmission was that these laws of Torah were meant to be studied, "*she'yitasku bahem*".

According to Rashi, what is perhaps most crucial regarding Marah was that the Jewish people were not only being introduced to core Torah principles, but required to immerse themselves in the study of these sections of the Torah. In an important sense, and in parallel to the notion that the institution of *keriat ha-Torah* was introduced at Marah, the most important advent of Marah was that the Jewish people were not only being slowly introduced to mitzvot, but to the cardinal mitzvah of Talmud Torah per se.

In this sense, one can appreciate Chazal's perception of the next stop in the Jewish journey, at the oasis of Elim, as one whose very choreography was rooted in an understanding of Torah, with twelve springs representing each tribe's connection to Torah, and seventy palm trees in conjunction with the different perspectives of the elders, *shivim panim l'Torah*.

This presentation of Rashi's view, that Marah was really about *limmud ha-Torah*, is endorsed by Ramban. Indeed, Ramban notes that, according to Rashi, the Jewish people were not actually obligated to observe these laws as of yet, but merely to study them, to become familiarized with them, in advance of the forthcoming mandate of Sinai.

Further, Ramban notes that, according to Rashi, the test of Marah, *v'sham nisahu*, was that, having been able to immerse themselves in the depth and profundity of these laws, whether the Jewish people would accept these laws with joy and gladness when they were eventually mandated at Sinai.

What emerges then, from Rashi's perspective, is that the transition between Yam Suf to Marah was a shift between experiencing the exultant joy of the Divine presence in moments of transcendent grandeur, and appreciating, by the same token, the intimacy of the Divine presence in the quiet, daily act of immersive Torah study.

Marah was indeed an indispensable step on the road to Sinai in so far as it allowed the Jewish people to begin to understand that the Almighty was not only to be found in the sturm und drang of plagues in Egypt, but in the halls of study, in appreciating the subtle beauty of his laws.

III. Ramban's Approach: Derekh Eretz Kadmah L'Torah

After explicating the depth of Rashi's approach, Ramban himself offers two alternative explanations for the meaning of Marah.

First, Ramban adopts a pragmatic tone. As the Jewish people had lacked for water, Moshe was teaching them the "chok u'mishpat" of desert life, of practical survival in the harsh and unforgiving desert wilderness.

Alternatively, Ramban notes, Marah was a moment when the Jewish people were being introduced not to specific mitzvot, or even the concept of Torah study, but to six overarching Jewish values.

First, amplifying the word "chok", Ramban asserts that Moshe was teaching the Jewish people that in times of distress they are to call to Hashem, not to merely complain, as they did to Moshe. This view is clearly parallel to Ramban's considered halakhic view, contra Rambam, that to the extent that there is a Torah level obligation to pray, it is only obligatory in times of distress.

Then, developing the word "mishpat", Ramban enumerates five further values: that they should love each other, *le'ehov ish et re'ehu*; they should adhere to the guidance of their sages, *l'hitnabeg ba'atzat zekeinim*; they should demonstrate modesty, *ha'tzneah lechet b'ohaleihem b'inyan nashim v'yeladim*; they should behave peaceably with those who come to their camp for trade; and that they should not allow their camp to become morally degenerate, both with respect to aggression, theft, and debauchery.

For Ramban, the crux of Marah can be distilled in a singular, celebrated rabbinic expression: *derekh eretz kadmah l'Torah*. Before the Jewish people would receive the Torah, in all of its details, *b'dikdukeha uvi'pirtoteha*, they were taught to embrace core Torah values: developing a deep and visceral sense of dependency on the Almighty, love of their fellow Jew, reverence for Sages, modesty, peace with one's neighbors, and generally refined moral standing.

What emerges for Ramban is nothing short of tantalizing. The meaning of Marah is that our capacity to receive the Torah depends on our refining our character, both with respect to our cleaving to the Almighty, and, in many different respects, as it concerns interpersonal dimensions.

This is not only true, apparently, at the individual level, but, in Ramban's telling, at the national level as well. The cultivation and development of a national ethos of elevated moral culture was wholly essential to fully realizing our national destiny as *mamleket kohanim v'goy kadosh*, which would be ratified at Sinai itself.