

Parshat Beha'alotcha 5777

The change in role of Moshe Rabbeinu after the episode of Kivrot-ha'taava-

Chapter 11 of parshat Be'haalotcha describes the rebellion of the people at Kivrot-ha'taava: *"the rabble among them cultivated a craving and the Children of Israel wept again, saying "who will feed us meat?"* (Bamidbar 11/4)

The word *"taava"* means craving or lust and the place was called Kivrot-ha'taava because the people who had been craving meat were buried there. The people proceed to complain about the manna and Hashem responds with great anger. However, it is the response of Moshe Rabbeinu which seems to me to be uncharacteristic: *"Moshe said to Hashem: "Why have You done evil to Your servant? Why have I not found favour in Your eyes, that You place the burden of this entire people upon me? Did I conceive this entire people or give birth to it that You say to me, "Carry them in your bosom, as a nurse carries a suckling, to the Land that You swore to its forefathers? Where shall I get meat that we may eat? I alone cannot carry this entire nation."* (Bamidbar 11/11-15)

Moshe Rabbeinu had lived through many crises and stressful moments. The worst in my view was the sin of the Golden Calf, which had shaken the core relationship between Hashem and the Jewish people. Yet Moshe had never faltered or panicked. He had never complained about Israel's shortcomings but had instead pleaded for Hashem's forgiveness of the people. Previously, there had been occasions on which Moshe had been frustrated with Hashem. For example, when Pharaoh had increased the intensity of the slavery, by no longer providing the Jewish slaves with straw to make the bricks, Moshe returned to Hashem and said: *"My Lord, why have You done evil to this people? Why have You sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he has done evil to this people but You did not rescue Your people."* (Shemot 15/22-23).

The episode of Kivrot-ha'taava was the first occasion on which Moshe became highly frustrated with the people. The people complained but instead of defending them, Moshe pointed an accusing finger. So, why did Moshe Rabbeinu react in this unusual way at Kivrot-ha'taava?

Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik zt"l explains that the reason for the shift in Moshe's demeanor can be found in the nature of the sin of Kivrot-ha'taava. The sin of the Golden Calf was the result of fear, since the people thought that Moshe had died. They intended the Golden Calf to serve as a substitute for Moshe. As there were mitigating

circumstances, Moshe prayed to Hashem to forgive the people. In contrast, the incident at Kivrot-ha'taava 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 people, mad with desire, abandoned all restraint and gave in to their desires: *"the people rose up all that day and all the night and all the next day and gathered up the pheasant, the one who took least gathered in ten chomers, and they spread them out all around the camp. The meat was still between their teeth, not yet gone, when the wrath of Hashem flared against the people"*. (Bamidbar 11/32-33). This is in contrast with the Jewish disciplined way of life, as evidenced in the story of the manna: *"when they measured it against an omer, whoever had gathered more had nothing extra and whoever had taken less had no lack. Everyone had enough to eat."* (Shemot 16/17-18).

This moral breakdown of the Jewish people made it clear to Moshe that his role as teacher of the Jewish people would no longer be sufficient. This role had begun in Egypt and culminated at the revelation at Har Sinai, when a slave society was transformed into a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. However, the incident at Kivrot-ha'taava required a transformation from Moshe. He was now called upon to assume not only the role of a teacher but also that of a nursing mother. As a nursing mother, Moshe would have to guess the people's needs and establish a strong emotional bond with the people.

According to Rav Soloveitchik, Moshe realised that he would no longer be able to have a life of his own, instead requiring total dedication to the people. Moshe's new role of total emotional dedication to the people might explain the connection to the last segment of the parsha, which describes Miriam's sin and her punishment. How did Moshe's devoted and loyal sister become so critical of him? Rashi (12:1), explains that Miriam criticised Moshe's withdrawal from family life, including his separation from his wife. Miriam thought that this behaviour was contrary to the Jewish approach, which holds family life to be an essential aspect of religious expression. Miriam did not appreciate that Moshe had to expand his role as leader to the extent that he could no longer carry on normal family life.

Pirkei Avot (4:28): *"Rabbi Elazar Ha'kapar said: 'Envy, lust (taava) and desire for honour remove a person from the world'"*. Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the vices of envy, lust and desire for honour all represent self-interest and are therefore inconsistent with our purpose in the world.