

Parshas Behaaloscha is a very pivotal parsha. The gemara says Sefer Bamidbor is not just one sefer. It is really comprised of two seforim plus a break of a few pesukim in between them, which is really its own tiny third parsha. In the middle of this week's parsha, we have the two pesukim of *בנסוע הארון ויהי* within brackets of two inverted nuns on either side. Chazal say that these brackets form separate parshiyos – one before the first nun, one in-between the nuns, and one after the last nun.

So we have two stories of Klal Yisroel – one before the break and one after the break. What does the gemara mean?

I can't imagine anything more relevant to our situation today than this idea.

There is a major issue happening now, which is the question whether or not to draft yeshiva bochurim into the army to help fight this war.

There is a very fundamental question that is being asked. Who is protecting this country?

Many people have taken Jewish sovereignty over Eretz Yisroel for granted. This is Jewish land. It is ours for the taking. But in this parsha we will see that it is not so simple to think Eretz Yisroel is ours for the taking. Another thing people take for granted is that after it was conquered, it is now ours undisputably and cannot be taken away. This too, is not so simple.

At the beginning of the parsha we conclude the various details of how the Mishkon and the various shevotim were set up to travel in the midbor. Then we have the korbon Pesach being brought at the beginning of the second year in the midbor and the people who were tomei requesting that they not be left out and be given a chance to bring the korbon Pesach later. This is how we get the dinim of Pesach Sheni.

Then we are told about the final stages that are needed to prepare Klal Yisroel for entering Eretz Yisroel. They can't just march straight in. There is a special protocol that has to be followed – a signal by trumpets is given for the onon to move and the Shechinoh to leave its location, which then triggers one machaneh to leave and the Mishkon to be dismantled. Then another signal by trumpets is given where the onon stops and the Mishkon is reconstructed in the place where the Shechinoh is standing. They are only moving when Hashem tells them to. Eretz Yisroel isn't just ours for the taking. The posuk in Tehillim says quite clearly that we only have the right to take Eretz Yisroel away from its non-Jewish inhabitants because it is the place where we fulfill Torah and mitzvos. It is completely conditional.

Then we have an interesting interjection – of Moshe's dialogue with his father-in-law, Yisro, trying to convince him to come along with Klal Yisroel on their journey. Who is Yisro? He merited to have Moshe be a member of his household for many years. His daughter merited to marry him. Yisro recognized the greatness of Hashem through what he heard about yetzias Mitzrayim and kriyas Yam Suf and milchemes Amolek. He recognized this greatness because he searched throughout the world trying to find the true religion. He tried all the various pagan religions in the course of this exhaustive search for the truth. Now he finally understood where the emes is. He learned about evil, and hashgocho and reward and punishment and he came to convert. But it is one thing to recognize the truth as an abstract ideal, and it is another thing to live your life according to the truth on a daily basis.

There is belief – like our belief that our learning is truly protecting this country. Then there is living with that belief in a deep and sincere way. If we really believe what we claim to believe, then there should be no guilt and feelings of inadequacy by sitting and learning and not going out to join the army. But if I do feel guilty, that means my belief in the Torah's ability to protect us is very shallow. It is just a bunch of slogans and talking points with no real conviction. Yes, we need an army, but we need the merit of Torah learning to give them success.

How deep does your belief go? I remember many years ago, living in Los Angeles leading a yeshiva for people in transition on their way to becoming frum. Once, a talmid had a long discussion with me, and he summarized his dilemma very succinctly – "I know the emes is really for me, but I'm not sure if I am ready for the emes." It means, once he had been exposed to real Torah, he realized the Judaism he was living with before wasn't really authentic. Now he wasn't sure if he was ready for a life commitment to authentic Yiddishkeit. It isn't so simple.

Yisro had experienced an epiphany of what the truth really is, and spent a year in a supernatural existence in the midbor. It was an in-between part of his life. Now it is time to take this experience and bring the truth of the Torah into the everyday mundane existence of normal life. The mon will not be delivered to his doorstep every day. He will have to get water from natural sources. He won't be guided by the amud ho'aish and amud ho'onon by night and by day. Still, he has to keep learning and observing the Torah and living by the truth. It's not that simple to make that commitment. How deep is his belief?

I see the slogans plastered on the street about how we have to be willing to die to avoid joining the army. It seems like they are ready for mesiras nefesh! But do they really know what living with mesiras nefesh actually means? Out of my four great-grandfathers, three of them were great, towering talmidei chachomim, and one was a simple layman from Ukraine. He was afraid of being drafted into the Russian army. That would destroy his life of Torah and mitzvos. What did he do to avoid being drafted? He had a simple solution – cut off his trigger finger so that he would be useless in the army. One of the reasons I had the merit to learn Torah is from this ancestor's deep commitment to Yiddishkeit. There comes a point when you need to make a really hard life decision in order to be aligned with the emes that you know to be true.

The talmid who wasn't sure if he was ready for the emes thankfully made the right decision, and now he has children who are big talmidei chachomim and authors of seforim. He took the plunge and he didn't look back.

Moshe tries to convince Yisro to come along with Klal Yisroel – Hashem has promised us wonderful things. But Yisro realized that being a ger meant being an outcast – financially and socially. He won't have an inheritance in the land and no real social status in Klal Yisroel. Rus also knew that this was what she would probably face by joining Nomi. But, she didn't care. She stuck with Nomi no matter the consequences. Yisro did care. He didn't want to leave the whole life that he built in Midian. He thought he could be a good Jew living in Midian, but it was a compromise in the emes that he knew.

The Rambam explains why a ger is considered a *שנוולד דמי*. It is because changing your religion changes everything. You cannot remain with any of the old ties you forged – or even the family ties you were born with – after you became a Jew. You cannot have a genuine

relationship with anyone who doesn't share your connection to Torah – which is supposed to be the deepest part of who you are.

Moshe reminds Yisro how much he heard and saw and how much he experienced personally while he was with them. Moshe desperately wants to keep Yisro in the community. If Yisro leaves, it will reflect badly on the Torah because it looks like the Torah treats geirim badly. So Moshe has to bribe Yisro by offering the most fertile parts of Eretz Yisroel – near Yericho and the Jordan Valley. This is what ultimately convinces Yisro.

People can know the emes, and see the emes, but find it hard to live with the emes, day in, day out. My great-grandfather is an example of mesiras nefesh to live with the emes. He didn't have his finger amputated in a sterile, medical clinic with anesthesia or pain killers. It was painful and dangerous. But he knew it was necessary to stay frum and that is what he did.

Then we come to the whole downward spiral of Klal Yisroel in the midbor starting with the mis'onenim. The mon was an incredible food. The Yerushalmi says the brocho they made was **המוציא לחם מן השמים**. It has the exact taste and properties of any food they could imagine – delivered to them right on their door step. But it couldn't taste like five foods whose properties weren't beneficial for pregnant women. So Hashem removed these five foods from the mon. But Klal Yisroel want to taste these foods too! It's not enough! How do we understand this kind of extremely ungrateful attitude?

What is happening here is a display of the biggest yetzer horo in the world – the desire for no restraints – absolute hefkeirus. People want everything without restriction. We see this inability to tolerate any restraints from Homon. He rose to incredible power in the Persian Empire – everyone was bound by law to bow to him. But because one single Jew – Mordechai – refuses to bow, Homon couldn't take it. Everything he had became worthless to him and he was obsessed with killing Mordechai. The immediate result was that he lost everything and he ended up swinging from a tree.

Odom hoRishon was put in Gan Eden and could eat from all the fruits growing on every tree – except for one. He had everything a person could want. He couldn't take this one little constraint and he lost everything. He was thrown out of Gan Eden. Klal Yisroel wanted the mon to taste like everything they desired. They didn't want a life of restrictions – they didn't want to have to deal with issurim. Because of this, they were severely punished. They generated desire for its own sake, they demanded real meat – not this food that tastes exactly like meat. So Hashem brings them so much meat that they die with the meat still between their teeth.

Rashi explains that although they were about to go to Eretz Yisroel, Hashem realized that they weren't ready. They have to stay in the midbor for a while and learn to appreciate what Hashem wants to give them.

At this point, the Zekeinim die. Why were they punished? Back at Har Sinai, they received an incredible nevuoh, but they ate and drank at the same time. They didn't appreciate the unbelievable gilui Shechinoh that Hashem was giving them. They took it completely for granted. Hashem didn't want to punish them at the time in order not to mar the joy of kabbolas haTorah. But now that Klal Yisroel were exhibiting this same lack of appreciation, Hashem said Klal Yisroel will not be able to change their perspective if their leaders are also failing in this exact area. So this group of Zekeinim has to die and new leadership has to be set up.

Then finally we have the sin of loshon horo by Miriam and Aharon.

Moshe Rabbeinu was the greatest novi that ever lived. How can he be talked about like any other human being? Like any other novi? We have to appreciate his greatness. This is how the parsha ends and the theme of lacking appreciation goes throughout the second half of the parsha. This failure sets up the events of Shlach and Korach as we will discuss.

The problem is that when you get used to things, you take them for granted.

From the founding of the state of Israel in 1948 till the present day, the existence of Israel has been due to a constant stream of open miracles. But because these miracles have gone on for so long, we have gotten used to them. We take them for granted. Right before Pesach was had an incredible neis. We were attacked by Iran who sent 350 missiles and drones to no real effect. Hardly any damage! But we just keep on going with our lives like nothing happened.

On Erev Pesach there were two terrorists who drove into a frum neighborhood with automatic weapons trying to kill as many Jews as they could. There could have been a huge massacre! But nothing really came of it. It was an open miracle recorded on video for everyone to see. But we just go on with our lives like nothing happened! It doesn't shake anyone, it doesn't impress anyone. We still need yeshiva bochurim to stop learning to serve in the army and defend the country!

It is a failure that we have today. We live in incredible times. We have such an opportunity to sit and learn among comforts and luxury – and we take it completely for granted. We take off time from learning because of the slightest excuse. Do we realize the importance of Torah? Do we realize how vital our learning is to defend the country and keep us safe? Do we appreciate the very ability to learn Torah in Yerushalayim in these circumstances – how incredible it is?

Klal Yisroel had everything given to them on a silver platter, but it was not enough and they could not survive the midbor with that attitude.

We live in incredible times. We have to appreciate that it is an unbelievable gift from Hashem. Take advantage of it, but value it and do not take it for granted.