

Behalochtecha – Numbers 8-12e–

5/25/13 – Dave Smith’s comment that the entire parasha consisted of complaints triggered my thinking: first, the people started with complaints about Moses’ failure to provide them with the gourmet diet they had known in Egypt, then Moses complained of his inability to cope with their demands, then Joshua complains that Eldad and Medad are usurping Moses’ exclusive right to prophesy, then Miriam and Aaron complain about his choice of a wife and of his monopoly on the right to prophesy. Is anyone satisfied?

In this litany of complaints, I’m not sure anyone commented on God’s advice to Moses on how to deal with his problems: appoint 70 elders to share in his ability to prophesy. My initial reaction to this was a feeling that we heard this one before: didn’t Jethro advise Moses to appoint judges over successive numbers of petitioners and ease the burden on himself? Did Moses ignore the recommendation? Why the same advice again?

So I read the Aish.com Torah commentaries on the internet and as usual, am enlightened by Lord Sacks (chief rabbi of Great Britain, usually the first of six or seven orthodox rabbis who contribute comments on the weekly parasha every Thursday) who points out that the recommendation in Numbers 11:16 is not the same; this time Moses is not being advised to create an “infrastructure of delegation” which is an administrative device to spread the work load involved in settling disputes, leaving Moses as a de facto Supreme Court and sparing him the task of micro-managing secondary issues. The 70 elders do not administer anything. They share in Moses’ task of providing

spiritual guidance. The Torah does not tell us how precisely Moses responds to this advice but once he receives it, he realizes that he can share the task of what the Torah calls “prophecy,” expressed in his response to Joshua when the latter complains about Eldad and Medad. He turns to God for help with the complaints of Miriam and Aaron and ignores their questions about his wife (or wives). He stands aside while God deals with the people’s complaints about food in a manner in which the punishment fits the crime. Finally, he is able to pray for Miriam’s recovery despite her provocative behavior. In other words, he comes to terms with the demands made on him and is no longer in despair. It is the message “you are not alone” that brings about the change; whether or not he took the advice given and whether it was useful is much less relevant.

If I am not mistaken, Numbers 11 is the fifth and last of the episodes of kvetching in which the Israelites behave like spoiled children, always wanting something better than what God has given them and finding fault with Moses because he is human. One can be grateful if it is the last.

Postscript -6/15/13

I attended the service of 6/15 for which the parasha is Hukat and learned that the "kvetch" in Behalochtecha is not the last, since we have another in Hukat.

But Max Ticktin's very moving commentary made me feel a little uncomfortable about my use of the Yiddish term for childish whining now sounds too frivolous in my ears. Max reminded us that the tribes have been wandering in the desert for 40 years and are now close to death.

They did not, after all, have the advantage of the longevity of later generations. What is happening to them is more than childish whining about their leader's failings. It is more like regression to an earlier age when childish demands were more legitimate and also very likely fear of death. The Torah notes only the deaths of a few major figures and since it is not a sociological study leaves understanding to us.