THE SEVEN WEEKS THAT TURNED NEWLY-FREED SLAVES INTO A NASCENT PEOPLE OF GOD

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After Moses’ first failed steps to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian servitude and with both Moses and the Israelites disillusioned and disappointed, God appears to Moses and reveals to him the four basic components of the coming redemption. And I will bring you out ... and I will deliver you ... and I will redeem you ... And I will take you to Me for a people and I will be to you for a God (Ex.6:6,7).

This last step, which sealed the covenantal relationship between God and Israel, alludes to the giving and receiving of the Torah at Sinai. Given the location of Sinai, there is to be a time lapse between the liberation and the encounter with God. In fact, seven weeks of travel and dramatic experiences will ensue before the Israelites reach the wilderness of Sinai, which took place: on the first day of the third month after leaving Egypt (Ex. 19:1). Was this time-space interlude designed to serve some purpose or was it merely an unintended consequence of the distance between the two locations?

The Exodus from Egypt and the Sinai covenantal epiphany that are the two formative events of Jewish peoplehood are celebrated by two annual festivals called Pesach and Shavuot, respectively. While the date of Pesach is clearly given as the fifteenth day of the month of Nisan, the date of Shavuot is given in an indirect way: Seven weeks shall you count from the time the sickle is put to the standing corn, you should count seven weeks and you shall keep the festival of Shavuot (weeks) unto the Lord your God (Deut. 16:9,10). Although today, the date of Shavuot is permanently fixed the ‘counting’ was considered an independent command and is observed to this day. Also the name given to this festival, “the Festival of Weeks” testifies to the intrinsic importance of the time interlude that separated the two events. What role did this period play in the biblical narrative?

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Before we attempt an answer, there is another set of factors that should be considered. The covenant that was established at Sinai was both between God and a collective, the people called b’nei Yisrael (children of Israel) as well as between God and each and every individual present, to whom the experience was to be a personal transformative one reaching into the depths of his personality. For this personal experience, the people were told to prepare: sanctify yourselves, wash your garments... and be ready for the third day (Ex. 19:1, 15). However, were the people truly a collective? Did they have any trans-tribal sentiment of being a nation? Had they yet overcome the atomizing effect of generations of Egyptian slavery? Were they yet a cohesive society ready to make a collective decision and assume the responsibilities of a covenantal relationship? I wish to suggest that what happened during the seven weeks after the Exodus helps to explain the credibility we attribute to the people’s response at Sinai: and all the people answered together all that the Lord has spoken we shall do (Ex. 19:8). In what follows I will attempt to show how the events of the intervening seven weeks truly contributed to the individual’s development of a feeling of belonging to a larger grouping.

The arrival of the Israelites at their very first station seems rather uneventful; and they traveled from Rameses to Succot (Ex.12:17). Yet according to Rabbi Elazar, the place was so named because it was there that the following took place: For in succot did I (God) cause the children of Israel to dwell when I took them out of Egypt” (Lev. 23:43).1 If so, then the biblical festival of Succot was given to commemorate this seemingly ordinary event, that a group of people finding themselves out in the open make for themselves temporary shelters. What was so wondrous about that event that the Bible should see God as taking credit for its occurrence? However, there were two unusual factors in this particular situation that made it stand out. In a desert wilderness terrain, such as this, it is difficult to find material suitable for such structures, simple as they are. In addition, since the people left in haste they hardly had anything with them from which they could improvise. Under the circumstances, therefore, to build anything would require an organized group effort, which this people at this time were woefully unprepared to undertake. For years as slaves, they had been dependent upon others for their very food and drink, let alone building shelters. Nevertheless, the fact that they were able on their very first night on their own to provide for their families and livestock
was an unexpected and encouraging sign of their group spirit and boded well for the future. While it was the people who rose to the occasion, Providence provided the conditions that made it possible.²

After three days of travel, the people run out of water and when they arrive at a place to be called Marah, they find the water too bitter to drink. Turning to Moses in despair, they cry, *What shall we drink!* (Ex. 15:24). After appealing to God, Moses is shown a certain plant (“tree”) which when inserted into the water sweetened it, rendering it drinkable. The very next verse reads, *There He (?) made for them a statute and ordinance and there they were tested* (Ex. 15:25). I wish to suggest that “he” refers not to God but to Moses who realizing that traveling with such an unwieldy multitude in a hostile wilderness requires organization i.e. rules as to order of march, procedures for making and breaking camp, allocation of space, care and security of livestock. These are the ordinances he set down for them.³ The “testing” refers to the challenge posed by these rules whose observance would require discipline. If this was the main activity at Marah, then learning how to “cure” the bitterness of the desert water is to be seen as part of their training for the road ahead.

The next stop for the Israelites was at an oasis called Elam that had an abundance of springs as well as date palms so that the people were able to stock up on water and perhaps prepare loaves of dried dates for the road ahead. However, upon reaching the wilderness of Zin on the fifteenth day of the second month after leaving Egypt, Moses is confronted by a wave of discontent with the people muttering the following: *Would that we had died by the hand of God in Egypt where we sat by the meat pots and ate bread to the full than be brought into this wilderness where we shall all die of hunger* (Ex. 17:3).

Coming from a people recently miraculously liberated after decades of cruel servitude, these words resounded with ingratitude and small-mindedness. While the complaints in Marah had simply expressed the natural anxieties of people short of water, these complaints seemed to reflect a radical change of heart by the people regarding the entire project! It seems to have suddenly dawned upon them that no measures had been taken for their sustenance in the wilderness. While this came as a shocking disappointment to Moses it should be acknowledged that the fears and frustrations of the people can well
be understood. People who in the past never had to fend for themselves, finding themselves, their families and their livestock in a strange, barren and hostile environment cannot be expected to react differently. In the very next verse God speaks to Moses in an apparent attempt to address the legitimate demands of the people to be provided with a steady and reliable source for bread and meat: Then said the Lord to Moses, behold I will cause bread to rain from heaven (Ex.16:4), The Lord shall give you in the evening meat to eat and in the morning bread to eat to the full (Ex. 16:8).

The next thirty-one verses consist of an account of the providential phenomena of the manna (bread) and the arrival of flocks of quail (meat). In regard to the manna, there are special instructions how it is to be collected and prepared for the Sabbath. Noteworthy is the fact that God does not fault or admonish the people for their sharp words, suggesting that He understood their fears and concerns. I would go further and say that the reaction of the people was actually anticipated. For why else would a people be sent forth into a wilderness without provisions? Some would say it was to teach them to reach out to God, the Great Provider. Perhaps this is the lesson to be derived by readers of the Bible. But God’s response was not only to provide for the people’s immediate needs but to reveal additional information as how to survive in the wilderness.\(^4\) Both the quail and the manna were regular features of their wilderness environment. Furthermore, the very nature of the problem of collecting and distributing these items necessitated an organized group effort that would advance the development of a sense of belonging to a collective.

At the next station called Rephidim, the following occurred: And all the congregation of the children of Israel journeyed from the wilderness of Sin by their stages according to the command of God and encamped at Rephidim and there was no water for the people to drink. Whereupon the people strove [va-ya rivu] with Moses and said give us water that we may drink. And Moses said to them why do you strive with me and why do you test the Lord... and the people thirsted for water (Ex. 17:1.-3).

Here the issue of water takes on a more ominous character. Note the more demanding tone of the people’s give us water (Ex.17:2). Furthermore, their approach to Moses is described as strove (Ex.17:2) in addition to the usual murmuring (Ex.15:24). The former having the connotation of “faulting” so that Moses actually feels himself to be threatened, they are almost ready to
stone me (Ex, 17:4). How shall we understand this wild accusation against Moses: why have you brought us out of Egypt to kill us, our children and our cattle with thirst (Ex.17:3)? More importantly, why does Moses see in their behavior a testing of God (Ex. 17:2)? I wish to suggest the following. After their miraculous rescue from the pursuing Egyptians at the Reed Sea, we are told: and Moses led Israel onwards from the Reed Sea and they went out of the wilderness of Shur (Ex.15:22). That is, at this point it was Moses who decided when to decamp and when to make camp. However, in regard to this last journey from the wilderness of Sin to Rephidim, we are told it was according to the command of God (Ex. 17:1). Therefore, the people had the right to expect that at this location they would find their needed water. But alas there was no water for the people (Ex. 17:1).

It has been suggested that the people at this point still had water in their containers but were expressing their deep disappointment in God who had chosen this location. Disappointment in God led to anger against Moses who they believed had brought them this God. Moses on his part realized that the people were undergoing a crisis of faith calling it a testing of God.

The most significant element in God’s response to Moses’ plea for help is the complete absence of any criticism or admonishment of the people for their rash words. Take with you some of the elders and your rod, pass before the people, strike the rock and out of it shall come water (Ex. 17:5). This seemingly wondrous event is described in the most undramatic, matter-of-fact manner particularly when compared to a similar act almost forty years later. Even more striking is the name given to the place: Masah, marking the “striving” of the people against Moses and “merivah,” the place of the “testing of God” (Ex. 17:7) rather than any mention of the miracle of getting water out of a stone!

I wish to suggest that this entire episode of the rock is God’s response to the peoples’ demand for a steady, reliable source of water for the journey ahead in view of the failure to find sources of water along the way. There are both traditional and modern authorities that claim that there are certain types of rock in the area that retain rain water which can later be extracted. Moses is told to take with him some elders and perform the act in front of the people. This suggests that this technique of drawing water from a stone can be
learned and repeated by the people and is thus an additional lesson as how to survive in the journey ahead.

The last incident before arriving at the foot of Mount Sinai is the unprovoked attack by Amalek. In contrast to the order given by Moses to the Israelites when they were pursued by their Egyptian oppressors, which was, *God will fight for you and you shall hold your peace* (Ex. 14:14) this time Moses says to Joshua, *choose for us men and go out and do battle with Amalek* (Ex. 17:9). This marks the coming of age of Israel as a mature nation, as a unified collective ready, willing and able to fight for themselves. Moreover, the fact that a select few would be willing to risk their lives for the group is another step in that direction. Inspired by Moses, Joshua and his men repel the Amalekites by *the edge of the sword* (Ex. 17:13).

Taken together, the readings I have suggested for the aforementioned texts can explain the anomalies described in the introduction. The reason for naming the festival of “*zman matan toratainu*” (the Season of the Giving of the Torah) the Festival of Weeks is because were it not for events experienced during the intervening seven weeks, the newly liberated offspring of Jacob might not have been ready to assume the responsibilities of a covenantal relationship with God or wish to belong to a nation charged with a turbulent historic destiny. For this reason the celebration of the giving of the Torah was not given a specific calendar date but would become known only after a counting of 49 days. That is, its very happening would depend on how the people would respond to the events of the journey from Egypt to Sinai.

NOTES


2. The Succah experience on the national level can be viewed as supplementing the purpose of the Pascal Lamb service performed in Egypt on the eve of their departure, which had to be taken *according to your families* in order to *deliver your houses* (Ex. 12:21). That is in order to reunite and rededicate the family, the basic unit structure of Jewish comity.

3. Rabbinic tradition interprets “he” as referring to God (He) which helps to explain how the Israelites already in Marah knew about the Shabbat (which is assumed by Ex. 16:23). This enables the Rabbis to interpret the *statutes and ordinances* of Exodus 15:25 as referring to an early revelation by God of certain commandments which included the Shabbat.

5. Moses took the initiative and ordered the people to move on because according to Rashi he was dismayed by the frenzy of looting of the remains of the drowned Egyptian force that had washed up on the beach.

6. See the commentary of Malbim on Numbers 20:8. See also C. Humphreys, C. *The Miracles of Exodus* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2005). A very popular midrash attributes the providential Manna to the merit of Moses, the Cloud of Glory to the merit of Aaron and the Well or Spring that accompanied the Israelites in the wilderness to the merit of Miriam. While the phenomena of the Manna and the Cloud of Glory are specifically mentioned in the text, that of a mobile spring is not and is based on midrashic inferences from Numbers 20:1 and Numbers 21:18. I wish to suggest that the tradition of Miriam’s Well or Spring was a result of a merger of the idea of extracting water from a certain type of rock as a learned technique with the idea from Numbers 20:8 that water from a rock is a manifest miracle. See TB *Pesachim* 54a, *Numbers Rabbah* 1:6.