

“What Have You Done for Me Lately?”

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Parashat BeShalach

Explaining the term “Chamushim”

At the beginning of Parashat BeShalach, the Jewish people leaving Egypt are described as (Shemot 13:18) “Chamushim”.¹ A number of interpretations are offered by classical biblical commentators to clarify the implications of this uncommon adjective. The explanations range from understanding the word to connote “loaded down with wealth”—the result of the Jews asking for Egypt’s precious things prior to their departure,² to “highhandedly”, i.e., with their heads held high, in contrast to how we would have expected newly freed slaves to conduct themselves.³ Several of the commentaries understandably focus upon the apparent root of the word, “Chamesh” (five) in order to formulate their approaches. Targum Yonatan suggests that each adult was accompanied by five children, an interpretation that parallels commentaries on 1:7.⁴ Ba’al HaTurim invokes Yechezkel 39:9⁵ in which five different types of implements of war are listed, to posit that the Jews left Egypt armed and ready for battle.⁶

The view that “Chamushim” refers to the percentage of Jews leaving Egypt.

But in my opinion, the most interesting understanding of the word is the view that first appears in the Mechilta, and is in turn cited by the likes of RaShI⁷

¹ שמות פרק יג פסוק יח

ויסב אלקים את העם דרך המדבר ים סוף וחמשים עלו בני ישראל מארץ מצרים:

²See 11:2 and 12:35. See Ibn Ezra on 13:18.

³See RaMBaN on 13:18.

⁴See e.g., RaShI, Daa’t Zekeinim, and Ba’al HaTurim.

⁵יחזקאל פרק לט פסוק ט

ויצאו ישרי ערי ישראל ובערו והשיקו בנשק ו (1) מגן וצנה ב (2) קשת וב (3) חצים וב (4) מקל יד וב (5) רמח ובערו בהם אש שבע שנים:

⁶Rabbeinu Bachaye poses the following problem with regard to this interpretation: If God was going to protect the Jews and help them escape from Egypt, what need did they have for actual weaponry? He explains that while Divine Miracles will be Performed on behalf of the Jews—e.g., in the case of the war with Amalek in 17:11, the Jews’ success or failure was dependent upon Moshe raising his arms and the soldiers’ being inspired by his directing them to think of God’s Assistance—nevertheless they have to act as if they are truly at war. The principle is that while God is Prepared to perform miracles, He Wishes that such phenomena appear to come about via natural rather than supernatural causes. Requiring the Jews to be armed, parallels God’s Causing a wind to blow prior to the descent of the locusts upon Egypt (10:13, 19), as well as before the splitting of the sea (14:21), two miraculous events that did not require a natural phenomenon like the wind, unless one assumes that God prefers miracles that are at least somewhat subject to natural explanation as opposed to those that are clearly supernatural.

⁷The fact that RaShI devotes the majority of his commentary to the idea that the word “Chamushim” is a reference to the Jews having armed themselves before leaving Egypt, as opposed to the percentage of Jews that actually left, and the virtual non-reference by most

and Rabbeinu Bahchaye, i.e., that either only one fifth, one fiftieth, or most extraordinarily, one five hundredth of the Jews residing in exile actually left Egypt when the time came to depart. According to this approach, the original size of the Jewish people prior to their departure from Egypt consequently becomes multiples of 603,550 (BaMidbar 1:46), the sum of the Jewish men, excluding the tribe of Levi, above the age of twenty⁸ – 3,017,750; 30,177,500; or 301,775,000! A parallel Midrashic tradition appearing in Shemot Rabba 14:3 assumes that those Jews who refused to leave, died during the plague of darkness, so that their absence would not be noticed by the Egyptians, who would assume that the missing individuals left with their co-religionists once permission was granted by Pharaoh. The resulting fantastical, mind-boggling numbers of deaths that the Jewish people suffered at that time then become: 2,414,200; 24,142,000; or 241,420,000!

If only relatively few true believers among the Jews actually left Egypt at the time of the Exodus, it becomes so much more difficult to explain their subsequent behavior.

If those who left were the most strongly committed to at least Jewish identity and cultural heritage among the Jews,⁹ along with strong theological belief in God's Promises, how can we account for the interminable complaining,¹⁰ the repeated expressed desire to return to Egypt¹¹ and the readiness to resume the servitude from which they had been so recently freed, followed ultimately by the grave sin of worshipping the Golden Calf?¹²

of the Biblical commentators to this latter idea, suggests that such an approach is to be grouped with Derash (homiletic interpretation) rather than Peshat (interpretation that is highly attuned to the straightforward meaning of the text.)

⁸It is reasonable to assume that the tribe of Levi in its entirety left Egypt, as opposed to members of the other tribes. Just as the Levi'im are the source of the Jewish leaders Moshe, Aharon and Miriam, they were also involved neither in the sin of the Golden Calf (32:26-29) nor in the sin of the spies (BaMidbar 13:4-15—the tribe of Levi is not represented amongst the spies, implying that they were opposed to participating in this activity.) Consequently their commitment to following God's Will appears to have been clearly developed prior to God's Choosing them to serve as the source of His Priestly Class (Shemot 28:1). By their non-participation in the sins of the people, they earned the privilege to be involved in the care and upkeep of first the Tabernacle and then the Temples (BaMidbar 3:45). Korach, the leader of a rebellion against Moshe and indirectly against God Himself (16:1 ff.), also descends from Levi, but Korach would appear to be the exception rather than the rule with regard to Levitic loyalty to God and the Jewish people.

⁹VaYikra Rabba 32:5

R. Huna said in the name of Bar Kappra: Due to four things were the Jews redeemed from Egypt: 1) They changed neither their names; 2) nor their language; 3) they did not speak badly of one another; 4) there was not found among them even one individual who was engaged in promiscuous behavior.

¹⁰Shemot 14:11; 15:24; 16:2; 17:2-3.

¹¹Ibid. 14:12; 16:3.

¹²Ibid. 32.

And even if some of the complaints and confrontations are more readily comprehensible than others it is difficult to explain away all of them. There are five clear-cut confrontations between Moshe, acting as HaShem's representative, and the people in Parashat BeShalach, with a clear distinction emerging between the first four, on the one hand, and the fifth, on the other. The first four complaints share a common denominator:

- a) Immediately after they leave Egypt and see Pharaoh and his chariots pursuing them, the people say to Moshe, (Shemot 14:11-12) "...Were there insufficient graves in Egypt, that you had to take us out so that we could die in the desert? What have you done to us by taking us out of Egypt? This is what we meant when we said to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone and let us serve Egypt, for it is better for us to serve Egypt than to die in the desert.'"
- b) No sooner are they saved from the Egyptians at the Sea of Reeds, they complain once again when confronted by a pool of bitter water, and demand, (15:24) "What are we going to drink?"
- c) This is followed in short order by more grumbling against Moshe and Aharon about food, or the lack thereof: (16:3) "If only we had died by God's Hand in Egypt while we were sitting upon the fleshpots, when we were able to eat bread to the point of satiation; but you took us out of the land of Egypt so that we would all die of starvation!"
- d) And towards the end of the Parasha, when the people again worry about their water supply, they bemoan one more time the fact that they are no longer in Egypt, ([17:3] "Why have you taken us out of Egypt? In order to kill me, my children and my herds due to thirst?").

Recognizing that these first four pleas all focused upon the security and physical comfort of the Jews, a sense of deep insecurity about their welfare could understandably be attributed to their long years of slavery and harsh treatment at the hands of their Egyptian masters. If you have watched your fellows beaten, killed, starved and dying of thirst, you may be skittish when you think that the same fate is awaiting you in the middle of a barren desert. However, the fifth challenge, which is both an extension of the fourth confrontation,¹³ but nevertheless separate in tenor and audaciousness, this time directly questioning God Himself in terms of His Presence and active involvement in the lives of the Jews, seems much more difficult to explain away in light of immediate past events and therefore appears to be all the more damning:

¹³The question challenging God is explained in the Tora as the basis for part of the name of the place commemorating where water was produced for the people by Moshe's hitting the rock—"Massa U'Meriva"—i.e., the testing of God by the statement "HaYesh HaShem BeKirbeinu Im Ayin" as well as the disputation with Moshe over the lack of water.

e) (17:7) “HaYesh HaShem BeKirbeinu Im Ayin? (Is God in our midst or not?)”

In what way might it be possible to understand how the select few that left Egypt due to some degree of extraordinary trust in God and Moshe, and at the same time abandoning millions of their brethren,¹⁴ would have the audacity after everything that had transpired to even raise the possibility that God Had Forsaken them? HaEmek Davar on 17:7 further supports this problem by listing the miracles that had been and continued to be Performed all around the Jews: How can they pose such a question after all they had experienced and seen, including the miracles of the plagues,¹⁵ the pillars of cloud during the day and fire at night that indicated where they were to travel,¹⁶ the splitting of the Sea,¹⁷ the sweetening of the waters of Mara,¹⁸ the Manna,¹⁹ and the extraction of water from a rock?²⁰ The Tora even goes so far as to state (14:31), “VaYa’aminu BaShem U’BeMoshe Avdo” (and they believed in HaShem and in Moshe, His Servant). Either they did or they didn’t!

Perhaps the people didn’t literally voice this question, but rather it was merely implied by their general attitude.

Additionally, from a literary perspective, it is interesting to note that this fifth complaint in Parashat BeShalach, concerning God’s Immediate Presence among the Jews is not presented as a direct quote of what people said to Moshe, comprising part of the narrative of the story, but rather as an after-the-fact justification for why the location where the event took place was named “Massa U’Meriva” (the test and the disputation)—“‘Massa’ as a result of their testing HaShem saying, ‘Is God in our midst...?’” A close reading of the text would therefore raise the question whether the people actually articulated these specific words challenging HaShgacha Pratit (Particular Supervision by God of individual events, i.e., did He Know, let alone Care that they were experiencing a water shortage), or was this sentiment something generally implied by all of their complaining and second guessing Moshe, but never actually said in so many words?

¹⁴ The biblical assertion that only the Egyptians were unable to see during the plague of darkness—Shemot 10:23—suggests that if indeed the Jews who did not wish to leave died, that this was both witnessed by the survivors and required them to bury their brethren, certainly a terrifying final association with the land of Egypt. What sort of circumstances would have influenced these people to now plead to return to their servitude? If anything, they should be terrified for their lives to articulate any opposition to God’s Commandments and Masterplan.

¹⁵ Shemot 7:14-12:22.

¹⁶ E.g., 13:22.

¹⁷ 14:21.

¹⁸ 15:22-25.

¹⁹ 16:2 ff.

²⁰ 17:1-7.

Whereas the first four questions were unique to the Exodus experience, the last question might represent the most fundamental of challenges to a belief in God in future times and places as well.

Ta'am VaDaat notes that the theological challenge expressed in 17:7 was not unique to "Dor Midbar" (the generation of the desert),²¹ but rather becomes concretized for all time as a prohibition appearing in Devarim 6:16 "Do not test the Lord, your God, as you tested Him at Massa." The commentator defines this particular sin as where individuals, even the most pious and ostensibly faithful, make their devotion and service to God dependent upon His immediately Responding to their every desire. Although the particular need in this case was water, a similar attitude could apply to virtually anything that a person perceives that s/he requires at a particular point in time. (Perhaps it is for this reason that the metaquestion the people are asking is not a direct quote, but rather simply implicit in their demand for water.) The commentator delineates this type of flawed relationship with God as one based upon "Safek" (doubt), i.e., since there is the possibility that God Will Grant my prayers, it is appropriate that I worship Him; however I am unsure whether He Will, Can, Wishes to, Is Concerned about me, and therefore at best I am only "hedging my bets" by making the request in the first place. The reason why such a question is considered "over the line" for a truly religious individual, is because a person's faith should not be dependent upon tangible, empirically measurable rewards and punishments, but rather, in the spirit of Antigonus, Ish Socho's comment in Pirkei Avot 1:3, "Do not be like servants who worship the Master in order to receive a reward, but rather be like servants who worship the Master without expecting a reward."²²

A less charitable interpretation of the test that the people posed for God.

HaEmek Davar, in his commentary on VaEtchanan, supplies an additional degree of subtlety to the people's test of God at Massa U'Meriva that goes beyond Ta'am VaDa'at's approach. He suggests that the people weren't even thirsty when they made their demand that water be supernaturally produced for them. They just wanted to see if God Would Grant their desire. While even when an individual is in need, a demand that his need be met immediately could be considered a test of whomever the appeal is being made, the testing aspect of the encounter can sometimes be softened by the real and perhaps even desperate plight of the supplicant, who is experiencing paralyzing fear and concern for his/her long-term survival (a case of "Onus" [duress]?). But when the request is arbitrary, without any immediate purpose or benefit, then all that is involved is assigning a task to another in order to ascertain his/her capabilities and overall responsiveness, in this case a test of God, pure and simple.

²¹This is the appellation given by ChaZaL to those who left Egypt, but who for the most part died during the course of the forty years of wandering, never to actually enter the land of Israel, due to the decree following the sin of the spies (BaMidbar 14:29).

²²Commentators struggle with explaining how Yaakov's presentation to God following his dream at the beginning of Parshat VaYetze (Beraishit 28:20-22), is not an example of this objectionable form of testing the Divine.

Remembering the Exodus as a reminder not to ask improperly of God.

It is natural to wonder whether God Is Listening and Interested in Responding, particularly during the period of Hester Panim (the hiding of the Face, i.e. when miracles that take place are hidden rather than overt—see Devarim 31:18). But for people, who just experienced the visible and obvious interventions by God in their personal lives, to question His Concern and Benevolent Approach to them, was considered unacceptable, catalyzing the subsequent attack of Amalek (see RaShI on 17:8). Perhaps this is one of the reasons why we are so often adjured in the Tora²³ as well as in our liturgy to remember the Exodus, not just intellectually, but rather to imagine that we too were actually redeemed from Egypt.²⁴ God’s repeated Interventions on behalf of His People when they were in dire straits during that period of Jewish history, is meant to serve as a touchstone for all generations to believe that He Cares, He Hears, He Responds, and we therefore should engage in whole-hearted Avodat HaShem (service of God), devoid of subjecting Him to a series of loyalty tests. We must remember that we have more to prove than He ever Does.

²³E.g., Shemot 20:2; 13:14, 16; Devarim 7:18; 9:7.

²⁴Mishna Pesachim 10:5 “In every generation, an individual is obligated to see himself as if he left Egypt, as it is written (Shemot 13: 8) ‘And you shall tell your child in that day saying: For the sake of this did HaShem do this for me when I left Egypt.’”