

Behaalotecha

“The people took to complaining bitterly before [lit. in the ears of] Hashem. Hashem heard and was incensed: a fire of Hashem broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. The people cried out to Moshe. Moshe prayed to Hashem, and the fire died down.”
(Numbers 11:1-3)

In this week’s parsha, two unhappy incidents occur which become to some extent definitive of Israel’s time in the desert. In the first one we are only informed that the people “complained bitterly” to Hashem. However, the Sages explain that the nation claimed they were tired from traveling, and began to express their unhappiness. Hashem punishes them for this expression. Later, they demand meat instead of the miraculous man (manna) which was sustaining them until this point. For this complaint, as well, they are punished severely.

The commentators note the use of the phrase *be’aznei*, “in the ears of” Hashem. Of course, Hashem has no physical body. So the use of this term must be intended to highlight a particular aspect of this event. Rashi says that they spoke in a manner intended to be disrespectful to Hashem, to “aggravate” Him, as it were. He quotes the Sages who say that when the people subsequently cried out to Moshe, their action was comparable to the son of an earthly king who has angered his father. When he sees how angry his father is, he runs to his father’s close friend, and begs him to mediate between them.

This is emblematic of a serious degradation in the intimate relationship between Hashem and His people. When a third party is intervening in a close relationship, it is never a good sign. The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816-1893) deepens this idea by pointing out that Israel was aware of the great intimacy between them and Hashem, and nonetheless chose to violate that closeness by pouring out negativity and complaints “in His ears”, as it were - privately, with no one else to hear. This was a dreadful insult to their relationship with Hashem, Who only desires the best for His people.

There are times when in even our closest relationships, we find cause to complain. Of course, healthy relationships include the open communication of grievances. However, when we choose to

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communicate criticism and blame in the most vulnerable and sensitive moments, we risk destroying what we have built. We have been at home together for a long time. Hopefully soon we will be released; until then, let us try to cherish and care for each other as is appropriate during these stressful times.

“It is not a lack of love, but a lack of friendship that makes unhappy marriages.”

Friedrich Nietzsche

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Asher Coleman

