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The Silenced Years

By Rabbi Yitzhak Halberstam

When one investigates the timeline of the 5 books of the Torah, one realizes that though the first book, *Bereshit*, covers several millennia, the rest of the books are more constrained. *Shemot* begins with the death of the sons of Yaakov and extends to the exodus from Egypt and the encampment around Mt. Sinai – a period of 430 years or so. *Vayikrah* has no real timeline associated with it; it is frozen in the months around the Israelite encampment at Sinai. The last book, *Devarim*, details the last few months of Moshe's life and his farewell address to his people. The book of *Bamidbar*, on the other hand, covers the time from the disengagement from Mt. Sinai to the arrival at the eastern bank of the Jordan River – roughly 38 years. At first, this time period does not seem exceptional compared with the other four books of the Torah. When one takes a closer look, however, one finds that most of the 38 years are shrouded in complete silence and are conveniently glossed over, both in this week's *Parsha* and in its counterpart in the *Parshat Devarim*.

Hukat picks up after the rebellion of Korach and his sympathizers. It speaks elliptically about the law of the red heifer and its role in cleansing those who have come into contact with death. The next verse (12:1) finds us in a new era, and speaks about the congregation of Israel arriving on the first month at Kadesh, near the border with Edom. It does not list the year of this arrival. The astute reader will notice quickly, however, that the nation that arrives at Kadesh is not the nation that they have be-

come familiar with during the past two and one half books. It is the next generation, the generation of once-young children when God issued His sentence of extinction to their parents in the aftermath of the spies' betrayal. The last 3 members of this older generation soon make their exit. In a few verses, Miriam dies, and Moshe and Aharon are informed that their days are numbered, as well. By the end of the *Parsha*, only Moshe remains of the older generation, with the exception, of course, of Yehoshua and Kalev who are waiting in the wings to cross into the land of Canaan. The 38 years whisk by in the instance of a verse, as if the author had gone to sleep and woke four decades later.

In its counterpart in *Devarim* there is not much more detail. After re-telling the story of the spies and God's promise to wait until the sinful generation is gone, verse 2:1 informs us that the Israelites returned towards Suf and circled Mt. Seir many days (years?). The next verse tells us that God appeared to Moshe and told him to head north again. In verses 2:14 – 16, we are told that the time it took for the Israelites to travel from Kadesh Barnea to Zered was 38 years, until the generation of original warriors was gone. The story continues with the events after the 38 years. Not even in the re-telling does Moshe hint at what may have occurred during those long years of aimless wandering. In attempting to set the time of the Korach rebellion, Ibn Ezra (on verse 16:1 in *Bamidbar*) believes that it is not in its correct chronological position. He states that the rebellion actually took place before the episode with the spies. The Ramban, as usual, does not want to upset the order of the Torah unless forced to do so. He maintains that the rebellion took place right after, and as a result of, the spy episode. Be-

land, they became restless and uncomfortable and attempted to replace their leaders. Once their rebellion was suppressed and the laws of the gifts of the kohanim were enunciated, the nation and God sink into silence. The section of the red heifer, according to Dr. Yoel Bin Nun, is the Torah's way of dealing with the decades of death that succeeded the spies. The description of how to cleanse oneself from the impurities of death is a euphemistic illusion to the death that was visited on the slave generation that had so gloriously left Egypt. At the end of the section on the red heifer, the generation is gone, and the new generation begins heading toward the promised land.

This long hiatus is purposeful. It is a demonstration of what is generally called *הסתר פנים* *hester panim* a decided absence of God from His creations. Like a spurned lover, God leaves His chosen nation to its own devices and closes all contacts with them. He does, however, provide for them as they have become accustomed. The manna still greets them every morning and the pillar of cloud still leads them on their way. But He does not communicate with them, not even through Moshe. If they falter, He does not punish them. If they are meritorious, He does not reward them. And He does not record their deeds in His book. Only after the last of the generation dies, is He willing to resume the history of Israel.

This removal of the Omnipresence from the scene is God's ultimate punishment. In the first covenant that God makes with the people of Israel, He warns them: – "והלכתי אף אני עמכם בקרי" – "I, too, will go with you occasionally." He will not be there for them all the time as they had become accustomed. He will be there *sometimes* for them, just as they are there sometimes for Him. In the second covenant (or, more precisely, in its postscript) at the end of Devarim (31:17) His warning

is more dire: " והרה אפי בו ביום ההוא ועזבתים והסתרתי פני " "...מהם" My anger will be kindled against them on that day and I will leave them and conceal My face from them." The generation hearing these words knew well the implications of that warning. They grew up in an era of God's concealment. Although their parents may have been punished, usually immediately, by God for their transgressions, they still experienced His imminence on a daily basis. The children, however, only felt God's rejection and abandonment – a more serious and painful experience than punishment.

In later years, God's presence would come and go depending on the behavior of the people. Throughout the years of the judges, God would leave them when they turned away from Him, but return when they called out for salvation. Under the kings of the Northern Kingdom, the people became so steeped in idolatry that God could not influence them even through miracles. Rabbi Levi ben Gershon in his commentary on Melachim I (19:11) explains that Eliyahu found God's presence in the *קול דקה*—the sound of stillness, because God was trying to impress upon Eliyahu that his generation was not ready even for punishment, as he Eliyahu demanded. Instead, He treats them with a masked silence. He leaves them to the vicissitudes of history and nature, experiences that a small nation such as Israel could never endure. In the end, though, He assures Eliyahu that He will return to His nation, destroy the evil in their midst, and redeem those who are truly worthy of redemption.

Yitzhak Halberstam is a musmach of YU and received a PhD from NYU in meteorology. He has done research for NASA and the US Air Force, has taught at Maimonides School in Brookline, MA, at Tarbut V'Torah in Irvine, CA, and is currently teaching at the Frisch School in Paramus, NJ.