

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS ZT"l

Covenant & Conversation

The book of Bamidbar draws to a close with an account of the cities of refuge, the six cities -- three on each side of the Jordan -- set apart as places to which people found innocent of murder, but guilty of manslaughter, were temporarily exiled.

In early societies, especially non-urban ones that lacked an extensive police force, there was a concern that people would take the law into their own hands, in particular when a member of their family or tribe had been killed. Thus would begin a cycle of vengeance and retaliation that had no natural end, one revenge-killing leading to another and another, until the community had been decimated. This is a phenomenon familiar to us from literature, from the Montagues and Capulets of Romeo and Juliet, to the Sharks and Jets of West Side Story, to the Corleones and Tattaglias of The Godfather.

The only viable solution is the effective and impartial rule of law. There is, though, one persisting danger. If Reuben killed Shimon and is deemed innocent of murder by the court -- it was an accident, there was no malice aforethought, the victim and perpetrator were not enemies -- then there is still the danger that the family of the victim may feel that justice has not been done. Their close relative lies dead and no one has been punished.

It was to prevent such situations of "blood vengeance" that the cities of refuge were established. Those who had committed manslaughter were sent there, and so long as they were within the city limits, they were protected by law. There they had to stay until -- according to our parsha -- "the death of the High Priest" (Num. 35:25).

The obvious question is, what does the death of the High Priest have to do with it? There seems no connection whatsoever between manslaughter, blood vengeance, and the High Priest, let alone his death.

Let us look at two quite different interpretations. They are interesting in their own right, but more generally they show us the range of thought that exists within

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Rachel Mintz

Rachel Menucha bas Tzivia, z"l
by Debra Markowitz and David Kaplan

Judaism. The first is given by the Babylonian Talmud: "A venerable old scholar said, 'I heard an explanation at one of the sessional lectures of Rava, that the High Priest should have prayed to God for mercy for his generation, which he failed to do.'" (Makkot 11a)

According to this, the High Priest had a share, however small, in the guilt for the fact that someone died, albeit by accident. Murder is not something that could have been averted by the High Priest's prayer. The murderer was guilty of the crime, having chosen to do what he did, and no one else can be blamed. But manslaughter, precisely because it happens without anyone intending that it should, is the kind of event that might have been averted by the prayers of the High Priest. Therefore it is not fully atoned for until the High Priest dies. Only then can the manslaughterer go free.

Maimonides offers a completely different explanation in The Guide for the Perplexed: "A person who killed another person unknowingly must go into exile because the anger of "the avenger of the blood" cools down while the cause of the mischief is out of sight. The chance of returning from the exile depends on the death of the High Priest, the most honoured of men, and the friend of all Israel. By his death the relative of the slain person becomes reconciled (ibid. ver. 25); for it is a natural phenomenon that we find consolation in our misfortune when the same misfortune or a greater one has befallen another person. Amongst us no death causes more grief than that of the High Priest. (The Guide for the Perplexed III:40)

According to Maimonides, the death of the High Priest has nothing to do with guilt or atonement, but simply with the fact that it causes a collective grief so great that it causes people forget their own misfortunes in the face of a larger national loss. That is when people let go of their individual sense of injustice and desire for revenge. It then becomes safe for the person found guilty of manslaughter to return home.

What is at stake between these two profoundly different interpretations of the law? The first has to do with whether exile to a city of refuge is a kind of punishment or not. According to the Babylonian Talmud it seems as if it was. There may have been no intent. No one was legally to blame. But a tragedy has happened at the hands of X, the person guilty of manslaughter, and even the High Priest shared, if only negatively and passively, in the guilt. Only when both have undergone some suffering, one by way of exile, the other by way of

(natural, not judicial) death, has the moral balance been restored. The family of the victim feel that some sort of justice has been done.

Maimonides however does not understand the law of the cities of refuge in terms of guilt or punishment whatsoever. The only relevant consideration is safety. The person guilty of manslaughter goes into exile, not because it is a form of expiation, but simply because it is safer for him to be a long way from those who might be seeking vengeance. He stays there until the death of the High Priest because only after national tragedy can you assume that people have given up thoughts of taking revenge for their own dead family member. This is a fundamental difference in the way we conceptualise the cities of refuge.

However, there is a more fundamental difference between them. The Babylonian Talmud assumes a certain level of supernatural reality. It takes it as self-understood that had the High Priest prayed hard and devotedly enough, there would have been no accidental deaths. Maimonides' explanation is non-supernatural. It belongs broadly to what we would call social psychology. People are more able to come to terms with the past when they are not reminded daily of it by seeing the person who, perhaps, was driving the car that killed their son as he was crossing the road on a dark night, in heavy rainfall, on a sharp bend in the road.

There are deaths -- like those of Princess Diana and of the Queen Mother in Britain -- that evoke widespread and deep national grief. There are times -- after 9/11, for example, or the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004 -- when our personal grievances seem simply too small to worry about. This, as Maimonides says, is "a natural phenomenon."

This fundamental difference between a natural and supernatural understanding of Judaism runs through many eras of Jewish history: Sages as against Priests, philosophers as against mystics, Rabbi Ishmael as against Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides in contradistinction to Judah Halevi, and so on to today.

It is important to realise that not every approach to religious faith in Judaism presupposes supernatural events -- events, that is to say, that cannot be explained within the parameters of science, broadly conceived. God is beyond the universe, but His actions within the universe may nonetheless be in accordance with natural law and causation.

On this view, prayer changes the world because it changes us. Torah has the power to transform society, not by way of miracles, but by effects that are fully explicable in terms of political theory and social science. This is not the only approach to Judaism, but it is Maimonides', and it remains one of the two great ways of understanding our faith. *Covenant and Conversation* is kindly sponsored by the Schimmel Family in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel zt"l © 2024 The Rabbi Sacks Legacy Trust rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“This is the thing [or word] which God has commanded.” (Numbers 30:2) How was Moses different from the many other prophets recorded in the biblical tradition? Was there a distinction only in degree, or was there a much more fundamental difference, a difference in “kind” between Moses and those who came after him?

The opening verse in the portion of Matot may well provide us with an insight concerning this issue. We read, “And Moses spoke unto the heads of the tribes of the children of Israel saying: ‘This is the thing [or “word,” zeh hadavar] which God has commanded: when a man vows a vow unto God...’” (Numbers 30:2–3).

In his commentary, Rashi cites a midrash (Sifrei) which makes the following distinction between Moses and the other prophets: whereas the other prophets consistently introduced their prophecy with the word, “Thus said God,” (koh amar Hashem), the expression “zeh hadavar asher tziva Hashem” (this is the thing which God has commanded) is unique only to Moses (although koh also appears in Mosaic prophecies), and so zeh represents Moses' additional and superior prophetic status.

Rashi is apparently lifting Moses above the other prophets; he does not seem, however, to flesh out the substance of this superiority. One of the most important supercommentaries – or commentaries on the primary commentary Rashi – Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi, the Re'em (1448–1526, chief rabbi of Constantinople), suggests that the phrase “koh amar Hashem” (thus said God) expresses the intention or the essence of the vision, although not necessarily the vision itself; after all, the other prophets only see “through a glass darkly” (aspaklarya she'eina me'ira). Moses' prophecy, however, is through “a glass brightly” (aspaklarya me'ira), and therefore he had the power to express precisely what was given to his eye or communicated to his mind, word for word: “zeh,” this is (precisely) the thing, or word.

In Emek HaNetziv, the classic commentary on the Sifrei written by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the author questions any interpretation which could possibly suggest that the vision of the other prophets could be anything less than an exact transmission. Moreover, the Netziv proves that the use of the word koh elsewhere in the Torah is taken by the Talmudic sages to indicate something absolute and exact: for example, when the priests are commanded to bless the Israelites, we read the following words, “And God spoke unto Moses telling him to speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying: ‘This [koh] is how you must bless the children of Israel!’” (Numbers 6:23). And our sages insist that the blessing is to be recited exactly as presented in the text, twenty-two words, no more and no less, in other words, “This is how

you must bless....”

The Netziv therefore explains that what makes the prophecy of Moses unique, and what is the true significance of “this” rather than “thus,” is the fact that Moses communicated the divine word immediately upon his having received it, whereas the other prophets could only process their message after a delay of a period of time; after all, the prophetic state had a paralyzing and debilitating affect on the other prophets, weakening their physical condition, while Moses received the Godly message naturally, without the requirement of time-in-between for recuperation. It was that in-between time which caused the delivery of the message by the other prophets to be less exact.

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, the late erudite rabbi of London, called my attention to another commentary of Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (CHidushei HaGryz) which can truly illuminate our distinction between koh and zeh. When the young shepherd Moses is confronted by a burning bush which is not consumed, the Almighty attempts to convince him to accept the responsibility of Jewish leadership. Moses is hard to convince: “Who am I that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). But God counters Moses’ resistance: “Certainly I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12).

The Gryz points out that the real significance of this dialogue is more profound than Moses merely seeking assurance and God guaranteeing “back-up.” Moses is questioning the efficacy of human involvement altogether in what he thinks ought to be a divine mission. After all, did not the Almighty promise the patriarchs that He, God Himself, would act as the redeemer (Midrash Rabba 15)? The interpretation must be that the divine response “I will be with you” is God’s explanation that indeed He will act as the redeemer, but that God acts through human instruments. God requires, as it were, human beings to be His full partners; the ground rules with which the world is governed require divine objectives to be realized through human agency. Hence, God must insist that He and Moses go to Pharaoh and redeem Israel together; God is choosing Moses to redeem the Israelites alongside of Him!

I would suggest that herein lies the truest distinction between Moses and the other prophets, as well as the significance of the differences in phraseology in the Hebrew text. The other prophets succeeded in receiving and transmitting a divine will; Moses succeeded in living a life and doing deeds which were the human extension of the divine plan, “this is the thing which God commands.” Davar is more than a “word”; it is a thing, an objective and substantive reality. The other prophets conveyed words in accordance with the divine message; Moses, however, changed reality in accordance with the divine plan, in accordance with his actions. The other prophets spoke words which were a transmission of the divine; Moses lived a life which was an extension of the divine. And the Hebrew word zeh can

also refer to a human being (ha’ish hazeh, this man), and not only to a word, koh tomar (thus shall you say).

Perhaps this is why the Sifrei chooses to point out this distinction between Moses and the other prophets in the context of the opening verse of our biblical portion Matot, in the context of the laws of oaths and promises. Human beings have the power to alter reality by the oaths and words which they utter, as well as to effectuate forgiveness and absolution by words which they express (Numbers 30:3). The realm of oaths and promises unmistakably points out the almost God-like powers of human beings, the ability of humans to serve in an almost divine capacity as God’s helpers, as God’s partners. It is indeed the most exalted goal of every person to become a vehicle for the expression of the divine will. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch so interprets the biblical words zeh Eli ve’anvehu sung by the Israelites after the splitting of the Red Sea: “This is my God, and I shall be His sanctuary” (Exodus 15:2). Most translators render the verse, “This is my God and I shall glorify Him” from the Hebrew na’eh, to beautify, but Rabbi Hirsch derives the meaning from naveh, which means “home” or “sanctuary.” The human being, his very body acting upon the messenger of his brain, his heart, and his soul – must become the vehicle, the expression, for God’s will in its every word and action.

Moses’ physical being, Moses’ every act and word, was indeed a sanctuary, an extension of the divine. Moses is therefore the greatest of all prophets and the highest human achievement in world history.
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The fourth book of the Torah – Bamidbar – concludes in this week’s public Torah reading. The new generation of Jews, no longer the slave generation that left Egypt hastily and constantly longed to return there when faced with problems and difficulties, stands poised to enter the Land of Israel and fulfill God’s covenant with Avraham. However here again, narrow personal interests becloud the general picture and weaken the necessary national resolve.

It is no longer the so-called fleshpots of Egypt that beckon and entice. It is rather the pasture lands east of the Jordan River that force the cattle raising tribes of Reuven and Gad to plead with Moshe that they not be compelled to cross the Jordan and enter the Land of Israel.

Moshe’s initial reaction to their request is one of shock and bitter disappointment. He reminds them that their parents’ generation was destroyed in the desert for disparaging the Land of Israel and refusing to struggle on its behalf. And he warns them that they have apparently learned little from that bitter event in Jewish history.

Here they stand making the same error in

judgment and vision that the previous generation did. Moshe's greatest frustration is that the Jewish people can't see past their cattle, their personal gain, an imagined short term benefit and their refusal to acknowledge the grandeur of the Lord's long term vision for themselves and their land. It is this blindness of spirit and unwillingness to appreciate the uniqueness of Israel, the people and the land that Moshe bemoans.

But all of this temporary gain comes with cost and a price. Separated from their brethren west of the Jordan, the tribes of Gad and Reuven have a difficult time defending themselves and are the first tribes to be exiled. They produce no major leaders or heroes for the Jewish people and their dreams of prosperity and material success are only fleetingly realized.

Criticized bitterly and eternally by the prophetess Devorah for standing aside in an hour of national Jewish peril, they become the model of individual Jewish indifference to the general cause of Jewish survival and success. In our current world they unfortunately have many heirs and disciples. Mordecai warned Esther not to stand away and be passive in the face of Haman and his decrees. He warned her that when the Jews would somehow escape from the troubles she and her family would be doomed to extinction in the Jewish story if she allowed her narrow self-interest to rule over her national duty for the preservation of Israel.

Today, also, narrow self-interests govern many Jews – even leaders who seemingly should know better – in their attitudes, policies and behavior regarding the existential problems that face the Jewish people and the Jewish state. The Talmud teaches us that Jerusalem always needs advocates for its cause. That certainly is the case in the generation and times in which we find ourselves currently. Jewish apathy and alienation are our enemies. The allure of current political correctness in policy and mindset is misleading and dangerous. We too stand on the cusp of great adventures and opportunities. We should avoid the Reuven/Gad syndrome. ©2024 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

Why does the Torah spend an entire chapter outlining all of the Israelites encampments in the desert (Numbers 33)?

Rashi, quoting the Midrash, suggests it illustrates God's love for His people. "It can be compared to a king whose son was ill and whom he took to a distant place to cure. As...they returned, the king would recount to the lad all the experiences they went through... 'here we slept, here we had a cool resting place, here you had

a headache'" (Midrash Tanchuma). Just as a parent cares endlessly for a child, so did God lovingly carry His children through the most difficult moments in our travels through the desert.

Sforno sees the mentioning of these places as revealing the Jewish People's love for God. In his words: "He [Moses, as per God's instructions] wrote down...the details of their journeys, because it involved leaving for a new destination without any previous notice, which was very trying." Similarly, Jeremiah recalls God's expression of love for Israel, who, despite all odds, followed Him into the wilderness. In Jeremiah's words: "I accounted to your favor the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride – how you followed Me into the wilderness, in a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2).

Considering that the Israelites were just days before entering Israel brings another approach to mind. When taking any major step in life, it is a good idea to carefully reevaluate one's past. The listing of each resting place reminded the nation of these moments. It allowed for serious individual and national reflection and accountability. No doubt some of these places evoked memories of rebellion and even betrayal of God. Rather than avoid such memories, we should remember them with the goal of learning from those mistakes.

Also, bearing in mind that Am Yisrael was assuredly overwhelmed with enthusiasm, believing that the liberation of the Land of Israel would come in an instant, we needed to be reminded that accomplishments come in small steps, much like the Jews' incremental travel through the desert.

Thus, the Torah elaborates for an entire chapter on our journey. It teaches invaluable lessons for life: the importance of self-reckoning, the importance of changing misfortune into fortune, and the importance of realizing that lasting improvement occurs gradually rather than instantaneously. ©2024 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale

RABBI JONATHAN GEWIRTZ

Migdal Ohr

"And all young females without carnal knowledge, keep alive for you." (Bamidbar 26:11) Hashem commanded Moshe to take revenge on Midian for what they did to the Jews by causing them to sin. Moshe sent Pinchas and a thousand troops from each shevet, and they routed Midian. However, they did not kill everyone. The army brought back the women and children, as well as much spoils of war.

Moshe was incensed that they would bring back the very people who caused them to sin, and he berated the officers. He then commanded that all the women be killed, as well as the males of any age. However, one group was allowed to remain. The girls who were below

three years of age, Moshe told the army, "Keep them alive for yourselves."

The Gemara has a disagreement about what that means. The Rabbanan said it meant as servants, while R' Shimon bar Yochai says they could even marry them, Kohanim too, since Pinchas was amongst them and Moshe said, "for you," which included him.

Whether you say it was intended to keep those Midianite girls alive as maids or as wives when they grew up, the syntax of Moshe's command implies that this was more than permission. It sounds like a positive command, "Keep them alive," rather than, "you may keep them alive." Why would that be the case?

The Ohr HaChaim here explains the posuk's words to mean that they were to convert the girls to Judaism, for that would be, "life," and then they would be fit to marry and take as wives. Obviously, if they did not convert, even if they were very young, the Jews would not be able to marry them.

The Midrash relates that in order to identify which girls were worthy of this, Moshe and Elazar passed them before the Aron. Those who were pure were "taken in" by the ark, some sort of acceptance which showed them this girl could join Klal Yisrael, and were kept alive by Moshe.

Perhaps the underlying message of Moshe's command to keep these girls alive as an imperative, teaches us a broader lesson of not wasting any opportunities for kedusha. If someone can be holier and more sanctified than they are now, then we need to breathe life into that potential. We ought not to let even our own possibilities wither and die. Rather, we must keep them alive for ourselves – because doing so is good for us.

Immediately following this portion, come the laws of kashering and toiveling vessels, methods of raising the sanctity of even inanimate items, something that is possible when they come into the possession of a Jew.

It reiterates the fact that we can, and should, live life on a higher plane, constantly seeking out growth, and opportunities to rise and come closer to Hashem.

The Baal Shem Tov was known to do things ordinary people didn't understand. Once, he told one of his students to go to a particular island. The fellow caught the ferry to the island and waited all day for something special to happen. Nothing did, and he caught the ferry back in the afternoon.

When he returned to his master, he said that he had gone where instructed, but was unsure why, because nothing special had happened. "Did you do anything on the island?" asked the Rebbe. "No," he replied. "Did you eat anything there?" "Well, yes, I brought food along but lunch was uneventful."

The Baal Shem Tov said, "From the Six Days of Creation, no bracha or mention of Hashem has been said on that island. There were sparks of holiness

trapped there. When you made your bracha, you freed them, and elevated them to Heaven." ©2024 Rabbi J. Gewirtz & Migdal Ohr

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Galut

Translated by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss

Someone who killed another person unintentionally had to flee to a city of refuge (*ir miklat*) and stay there until the death of the *Kohen Gadol*. It is one of the 613 commandments for the rabbinical court to sentence the accidental killer to this exile.

The logic of this punishment is based on the assumption that it serves as atonement for the killer. Some *Rishonim* write that exile itself does not atone. Rather, atonement comes about only with the subsequent death of the *Kohen Gadol*.

When one person killed another, whether intentionally or unintentionally, he fled to a city of refuge. A court of twenty-three rabbis then summoned him to be tried. If he was found innocent (not responsible for the death), he was let go. If he was found guilty of murder, he was given the death penalty. If he was found unintentionally responsible for the death, he was sentenced to exile and sent back to the city of refuge.

The guilty party was escorted back to the city of refuge by two Torah scholars, to ensure that the relatives of the deceased did not kill him while he was in transit. Once exiled, the unintentional killer could not leave the city of refuge for any reason – neither to do a mitzva nor to testify. Even if he could have been of service to the nation, he did not leave. He did not leave to save people or property, whether from non-Jews, floods, fire, or landslides. If he did venture out, he was likely to be killed by avenging relatives.

As stated earlier, the death of the *Kohen Gadol* allowed him to return home. For this reason, the mother of the *Kohen Gadol* would provide food and clothes for the exiled killers, as she did not want them to pray for the death of her son.

If a killer died and was buried in a city of refuge, and subsequently the *Kohen Gadol* died, the killer's body could be reinterred in his home city.

Once the person exiled was free to go home after the death of the *Kohen Gadol*, he was like any other person. His time in exile had earned him atonement. If an avenging family member then decided to kill him, the avenger was liable to death (as he would have been for any intentional murder).

However, if and when the killer returned to his home town, according to Jewish law he was not allowed to return to his former position (if he had been a community leader). A horrible thing (the unintentional accidental death) had happened through him, and it could not be ignored.

Today, the sentence of exile is not in effect, as we have no cities of refuge. Furthermore, rabbinic courts

no longer try capital cases, so neither exile nor the death penalty can be carried out. ©2017 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI DAVID LEVIN

Changing Impure to Pure

At the beginning of this double parasha, we find that Hashem commanded Moshe to take vengeance on the Midianites after they had enticed the B'nei Yisrael into sexual promiscuity and idol worship and led to many deaths. After destroying Midian, the soldiers were commanded on the bounty which they had received. The Torah also commanded the warriors concerning their impurity caused by coming into contact with corpses. Though these laws were specifically stated here in the context of a war, the laws of impurity and the method of purification is applicable in any case of contact with a corpse, although in our current times, without the Temple and the ashes of the Red Heifer, there is no actual method of purification available.

The Torah states, "And as for you (the soldiers who fought), encamp outside the camp for a seven-day period; any of you who killed a person and any (of you) who touched a corpse shall purify yourselves on the third day and on the seventh day – you and your captives. And every garment, every vessel of hide, everything made of that which comes from goats, and every vessel of wood, you shall purify. Elazar the Kohein said to the men of the army who "came" to the battle, 'This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem commanded Moshe: Only the gold and the silver, the copper, the iron, the tin, and the lead – everything that comes into fire – you shall pass through the fire and it will be purified; but it (also) must be purified with the waters of sprinkling; and everything that does not come into fire, you shall pass through waters. You shall immerse your garments on the seventh day and become purified; afterward you may come into the camp.'"

Prior to the battle, the B'nei Yisrael were instructed about the extent of the revenge that the B'nei Yisrael was to take against the Midianites. The battle was to be fierce, and there would be many deaths. Our section begins with the ramifications of our soldiers coming into contact with these corpses. Those soldiers became impure by the very act that they were commanded to perform. Upon their return, they were not permitted inside the camp because of that impurity. The Torah then states the procedure for becoming pure again. While this explanation occurred earlier in the Torah in another context, it is mentioned again here because of the greater likelihood that these soldiers would be subjected to the impurity of corpses.

HaRav Shmshon Raphael Hirsch explains that the term, "habaim lamilchama, who come to the battle," does not say, "habaim min hamilchama, who come from the battle." This indicates that these instructions were given to the soldiers both before and after the battle.

They were warned about who should be killed as well as which people and items could be captured and then purified. HaRav Hirsch also indicates that the term "tofsei hamilchama, those who took part in the battle," which was used earlier in the paragraph, indicated that the bounty was divided among all those who participated in the battle, both officers and soldiers. Rashi explains that the soldiers were told that both they and their captives would remain outside of the camp until they had completed the purification seven-day cycle with the sprinkling of the water that contained the ashes of the Red Heifer. This appeared to be strange because non-Jews were not sprinkled with the ashes-water, but we must remember that these captives underwent circumcision and conversion even though they would remain slaves. The Ramban disagreed with Rashi because he understood that this statement would be unnecessary since we already know that a convert must be sprinkled with the ashes to make him pure. Here the sprinkling must have been commanded concerning the clothes worn by the captives which also needed purification. It should also be made clear that the camp referred to here is the innermost camp known as the Camp of the Shechinah, basically the Temple. A person, who comes in contact with a corpse, can go in the Camp of Yisrael and the Camp of the Leviim.

The Torah said, "any of you who killed a person and any (of you) who touched a corpse shall purify yourselves on the third day and on the seventh day." The Ramban explains Rashi's position, "Rabbi Meir says, 'Scripture is speaking about someone who killed with an object which is susceptible to impurity, and the verse here teaches you that the object (i.e., the weapon) renders the person impure through (indirect) contact with the corpse as if he had touched the corpse itself.'" The Ramban questions Rashi about whether a person who killed another with an arrow would be susceptible to this impurity. According to the Rashi, the Torah equates a person who kills with a person who only touches the corpse. The Ramban suggests that if the object which was used in the killing can be made pure by immersion, "then the person touching it does not contract the seven-day period of impurity, nor does he require the sprinkling." He would only need one day separation and immersion. The Ramban posits that the reason for the seven-day period is because the object, which is used to kill the person, causes the victim to be moved. In this way, the soldier who shoots an arrow, also can acquire the seven-day period of separation.

The final section of our paragraph discusses the objects which can be made pure again, and the process which removes that impurity. The Torah stated, "Only the gold and the silver, the copper, the iron, the tin, and the lead – everything that comes into fire – you shall pass through the fire and it will be purified; but it (also) must be purified with the waters of sprinkling; and everything that does not come into fire, you shall pass through

waters.” The process of purifying through fire applies to those things which are used for cooking through fire. The process for those things not used for cooking directly with fire, involves passing them through boiling water. This is the same process that is used today to purge any cooking utensil that accidentally was used for non-kosher food, or for a mixture of meat and dairy, or accidentally use of a meat pot for cooking dairy or a dairy pot for cooking meat. The purging of the impurity must follow the same process that enabled the impurity to enter the utensil.

HaRav Sorotzkin gives us a life-lesson from the process described above. Anger stems from and is ruled over by the fire of Gehinnom, and a person who is controlled by anger (fire) can only purge that anger with the fire of Gehinnom after death. One must not allow himself to be ruled by uncontrollable anger, or he will face the purging of that anger through the fire of Gehinnom, the process for removing damage to one’s soul before it can rightfully enter the next life (Olam Haba). When one is consumed by anger towards another for any reason, that anger will continue to build inside him unless he can learn to remove that hurt and forgive. We must all strive to control our emotions or we will be controlled by them. © 2024 Rabbi D. Levin

RABBI DOV KRAMER

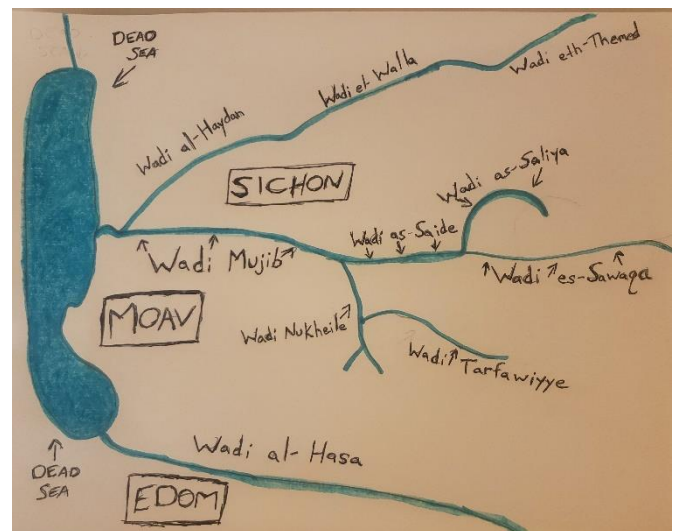
Jewish Geography

Although Nachal Zered is one of the encampments mentioned in the nation’s travels (Bamidbar 21:12), it isn’t listed as one of the encampments in Parashas Masay. But there’s a bigger issue: identifying which stream is Nachal Zered. Nevertheless, understanding which of the listed encampments corresponds to Nachal Zered could help us identify which stream it is.

Most biblical atlases (e.g. Carta, Oxford and Baker’s; see also Rand McNally, the entry for “Zered” in Encyclopedia Judaica and the maps in R’ Dun Schwartz’s “Eileh Masay”) identify Nachal Zered as Wadi al-Hasa, which empties into the southern end of the Dead Sea, flowing slightly north from east to west. However, as Yoel Elitzur (Places in the Parasha, Hukkat) points out, this would make Nachal Zered the border between Edom and Moav; since the Children of Israel were already parallel to Moav before reaching Nachal Zered (Bamidbar 21:11-12), and they were traveling south to north, Nachal Zered must be north of Moav’s southern border. Similarly, when Moshe recounts this journey, he mentions passing Moav (Devarim 2:8) before crossing Nachal Zered (2:13); how could Nachal Zered be the stream that empties into the southern end of the Dead Sea if that stream is the southern border of Moav? [In order to avoid this issue, R’ Schwartz extends Moav’s territory farther south. Many thought the Madaba Map identified Nachal Zered with Wadi al-Hasa, but Elitzur demonstrates how this was based on a misreading of

that map.]

Wadi al-Mujib, which also flows east to west and empties into the Dead Sea, is widely accepted as being Nachal Arnon, Moav’s northern border (after Sichon conquered much of its territory). The Children of Israel crossed Nachal Arnon (Devarim 2:24) after they crossed Nachal Zered (2:13-14), so Nachal Zered must be between Wadi al-Hasa and Nachal Arnon. Wadi al-Mujib is fed by numerous tributaries – each with its own Arabic name – and the part of Nachal Arnon that the nation crossed was not Wadi al-Mujib (since that part is north of Moav, and the nation didn’t enter Moav). Part of our mystery is therefore which stream that feeds Wadi al-Mujib they crossed when they crossed the Arnon, as well as whether any of its other tributaries is Nachal Zered.



Elitzur suggests that Nachal Zered is either Wadi Nukheile, which is in the eastern part of Moav and “flows south-north with a slight tilt to the west” before it empties into the Arnon, or Wadi Tarfawiyye, which flows southeast to northwest and empties into Wadi Nukheile. [Atlas Daat Mikra, which was co-edited by Elitzur’s father, has conflicting maps, with both streams identified as Nachal Zered.] However, based on how the discrepancy between the list of encampments and the earlier narrative is resolved, these streams, which are southern tributaries of the Arnon, should be rejected as well.

Before camping at Nachal Zered, the Children of Israel were in Iyai Ha’avarim (Bamidbar 21:11). In the list of encampments, after Iyai Ha’avraim they camped at Divon Gad (33:44-45), indicating that Divon Gad and Nachal Zered are one and the same. Numerous commentators (e.g. Ibn Ezra, Ramban and Chizkuni) say explicitly that Divon Gad is Nachal Zered, with Ramban adding that the next two encampments are also Nachal Zered. Divon was one of the cities built by Gad (32:34) after it was conquered from Sichon (which is why it’s called “Divon Gad”). Since the Arnon was Sichon’s southern border (Bamidbar 21:24), Divon Gad must be

north of the Arnon. How could Nachal Zered be one of the Arnon's southern tributaries if Divon Gad, which is on Nachal Zered, is north of the Arnon?

One of the Arnon's tributaries is neither north nor south of it, but to its east. Although it may seem to be an extension of the Arnon (or its beginning, since the Arnon flows east to west) rather than a tributary, Dr. Dudu Cohen, a geographer and Israeli tour guide who surveyed the area decades ago, described the difference between Wadi es-Sawaqa (this eastern tributary), which is a "shallow valley with low, soft roundish hills," and the western and central sections of the Arnon (Wadi el-Mujib and Wadi as-Saide), which have "deep banks" and "high cliffs," suggesting that Wadi es-Sawaqa might be Nachal Zered. If Nachal Zered is this eastern tributary of the Arnon, Divon Gad (and the other cities) could be on the northern bank of Nachal Zered without being south of the Arnon. But this creates two other issues.

In Moshe's recap (Devarim 2:13-18), after crossing Nachal Zered, G-d told Moshe that they are now crossing the border of Moav, Ar. [Ar seems to be the northeastern province of Moav, south of Wadi as-Saide.] This is problematic if Nachal Zered is either Wadi Nukheile or Wadi Tarfawiyye, because it means they didn't just go around Ar, but went through it, and Moav had refused to let the Children of Israel pass through their land (Shoftim 11:17). It's also problematic if Nachal Zered is Wadi es-Sawaqa, since they would have already been north of Moav, as opposed to passing its (eastern) border. However, it's possible that the verse really means that they've already passed Moav's border (and are now approaching Ammon), not that they are currently passing it. Additionally, if Divon Gad – and the next two encampments – are on the northern bank of Nachal Zered, they would be passing along Moav's northern border (east to west), with G-d telling Moshe to turn north, towards Ammon, without antagonizing them.

A larger issue is that after crossing Nachal Zered, they crossed the Arnon (Devarim 2:24). If Nachal Zered is the eastern tributary of the Arnon, they would already be on its northern side; why would they need to cross the Arnon? However, there's a small tributary that feeds the Arnon where Wadi es-Sawaqa feeds Wadi as-Saide. This tributary – Wadi as-Saliya – is semi-circular, first flowing east to west, and then flowing north to south, emptying into Wadi as-Saide (the central part of the Arnon). I would suggest that this tributary was considered part of the Arnon; after the Children of Israel crossed Wadi es-Sawaqa (Nachal Zered), and turned to the west (and possibly back towards the north), they crossed the Arnon by crossing Wadi as-Saliya.

If Nachal Zered is Wadi es-Sawaqa, and Wadi as-Saliya is considered part of Nachal Arnon, the nation would have passed Moav on its eastern border (without entering Moav), crossed Nachal Zered, traveled alongside it (north of Moav), then crossed Nachal Arnon,

going farther into Sichon's territory. After conquering this territory, the city that had been referred to as "Nachal Zered" was given a more specific name – Divon Gad.

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RABBI AVI SHAFRAN

Cross-Currents

For a religion derided in some circles as denigrating women, Judaism would seem to have an odd attitude. In a famous aphorism based on the list of adornments in our parsha (Bamidbar 31:50), Chazal state that a man is forbidden to licentiously gaze upon a woman, even at her "little finger" (Berachos 24a).

It's not asceticism that is being counseled there. We have no similar directive forbidding the passionate craving of a piece of apple pie, or an afternoon nap or one's easy chair. To be sure, it is good to deny oneself unnecessary pleasures, but there are no parallels to the "forbidden gaze" at women when it comes to food, sleep or furniture.

What then is the reason for that forbiddance, if it is not born of asceticism? Answer: respect for women. In a sense, the Torah's attitude here is not far removed from that of radical feminists who see the "male gaze" as degrading.

Ah, but a contradiction, it would seem, lies in our very parsha, in its subjugation of women to their menfolk's will when it comes to nedarim, where a father or husband can annul a woman's vow.

It seems clear that the lesson here is that being relegated to a particular role bespeaks no lack of respect. Such "limitations" are only belittling if perceived as such.

While women -- like men -- have particular roles in life, and some of them may seem constricting or even demeaning, they are neither. They reflect only realities, and coexist entirely comfortably with true respect. © 2024 Rabbi A. Shafran and torah.org

