

Hukat Selected Shorts Number 36
Rabbi Eliot Malomet 9 Tammuz 5781 June 19, 2021

במדבר י"ט:ב'

(ב) זאת חקת התורה אשר-צוה ה' לאמר דבר | אל-בגדי
ישראל ויקחו אליה פרה אדמה תמימה אשר אין-בה מום אשר
לא-עלה עליה על:

Numbers 19:2

(2) *This is the ritual law that the LORD has commanded: Instruct the Israelite people to bring you a red cow without blemish, in which there is no defect and on which no yoke has been laid. This ritual navigates the complex encounter at the boundary of life and death. Death, and proximity to death, is shattering. A person who comes close to death is rendered “impure” in the biblical system. In order to move out of that state of impurity the person is “purified” or remediated by coming into contact with life, symbolized by the concentrated “life essence” of the ashes of the red heifer, a blood-red cow whose ashes together with other blood-red items namely crimson, cedar and hyssop, are mixed with “living waters” to create the purifying solution. In the performance of the sprinkling ritual, the “sprinklee” becomes pure and the “sprinkler” becomes impure. While the “life-essence” solution clings to the “sprinklee”, a residue of the “sprinklee’s” encounter with death clings to the “sprinkler.” In other words, we have a snapshot here of the symbolic contact between life and death, where both persons emerge different from the encounter. Proximity to the boundary requires a symbolic ritual act of awareness of its power.*

במדבר כ"א:

(א) ויבאו בני-ישראל כלה-עדה מדבר-צן בהדש הראשון
וישב העם בקדש שם מרים ותקבר שם:

Numbers 20:1

(1) *The Israelites arrived in a body at the wilderness of Zin on the first new moon, and the people stayed at Kadesh. Miriam died there and was buried there. The Torah is telegraphing to us that the generation of the leadership is now in recession. Moses has lost the sister who saved his life; Aaron, a confidant. The personal intrudes into the public realm. In what way were they affected? How did they mourn? The Torah is silent on this as well as the reaction of the people. Perhaps they are overwhelmed with thirst. While teaching this text to a class of Holocaust survivors, the teacher noted how the survivors*

identified with the people’s silence. Overwhelmed by thirst, they were simply not able to muster the strength to be emotional. Or maybe, emotion is a indulgence for “normal” times.

במדבר כ"ב:

(ב) ולא-תגיה מים לעדה ויקהלו על-משה ועל-אהרן:

Numbers 20:2

(2) *The community was without water, and they joined against Moses and Aaron. But wait, Moses was a shepherd! If anyone knew how to find water, it would be Moses! Was he too overwhelmed by the loss of his sister? Was he now confronting his own mortality? Was he exhausted? Was he at the limit of his own patience with the people and the journey? Was it his fault?*

במדבר כ"ג:

(ג) נגרב העם עם-משה ויאמרו לאמר ולו גנענו בגנע אהינו
לפני ה':

Numbers 20:3

(3) *The people quarreled with Moses, saying, “If only we had perished when our brothers perished at the instance of the LORD! It’s a stunning statement. It’s almost like saying, “You think you’re the only one who has suffered a loss here? Our brothers and sisters have been dying now for this whole journey! We blame you for our thirst!”*

במדבר כ"ד:

(ד) ולמה הבאתם את-קהל ה' אל-המדבר הזה למות שם
אנחנו ובעירנו:

Numbers 20:4

(4) *Why have you brought the LORD’s congregation into this wilderness for us and our beasts to die there? Of course they don’t want to die. But they also don’t want to die there. Who wants to die in a wilderness?*

במדבר כ"ה:

(ה) ולמה העליתנו ממצרים להביא אתנו אל-המקום הרע הזה
לא | מקום זרע ותאנה ונפך ורמון ומים אין לשותות:

Numbers 20:5

(5) *Why did you make us leave Egypt to bring us to this wretched place, a place with no grain or figs or vines or pomegranates? There is not even water to drink!” A reference more specific than “a land flowing with milk and honey.” The desert experience is an exercise in the constant contrast with the imagined destination. But the irony here is that these people were already destined to die in the desert, forget figs and pomegranates! They*

never accept their fate.

במדבר כ':י"א

(יא) וַיָּרָם מֹשֶׁה אֶת־יָדוֹ וַיַּךְ אֶת־הַסֵּלֶע בְּמַטְּהוֹ פַּעַמַּיִם וַיִּצְאֹּוּ מִיָּם רִבִּיִּים וַתִּשָּׂף הַעֲדָה וּבָעִיָּרָם: {ס}

Numbers 20:11

(11) *And Moses raised his hand and struck the rock twice with his rod. Out came copious water, and the community and their beasts drank.* File under: Heartbreaking moments in the Torah. God told him to “speak” to the rock. “Speaking” is not something Moses does easily. Especially to rocks. To communicate bluntly to the Egyptian taskmaster, he struck him. To communicate his anger to the Israelites when they worshiped the Golden Calf, he shattered the tablets. He has already struck a rock for water, and used hand signals for a battle. Besides, he’s had it here. *Imagined Oprah interview: Oprah: What was going through your mind at that moment? Why did you do it? Moses: Because. Read the book.*

במדבר כ':י"ד

(יד) וַיִּשְׁלַח מֹשֶׁה מְלָאָכִים מִקִּדְשׁ אֱלֹהֵי מִלְּךָ אֲדֹם כֹּה אָמַר אֲחִידִי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתָּה יְדַעַת אֵת כָּל־הַתְּלָאָה אֲשֶׁר מִצְּאִתָּנוּ:

Numbers 20:14

(14) *From Kadesh, Moses sent messengers to the king of Edom: “Thus says your brother Israel: You know all the hardships that have befallen us; This is Moses engaging in diplomacy. Contrast with Jacob’s delegation to his brother Esau in Genesis (32:34): no gestures of reconciliation, no deference, no gifts. There, Esau melted like butter. Here, Esau’s descendants are more like clay. They recall the duplicity of Jacob and the humiliation of Esau. Proponents of a ‘lost cause,’ they perpetuate Esau’s honor and hostility. They remain forever jealous of Israel who got the better blessing and the special relationship with God.*

במדבר כ':י"ח

(יח) וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו אֲדֹם לֹא תַעֲבֹר בְּיַד־בְּחַרְבִּי אֲצִיא לְקִרְאִתְּךָ:

Numbers 20:18

(18) *But Edom answered him, “You shall not pass through us, else we will go out against you with the sword.”* Edom to Israel: *Forget about it. No way! Get outta here!* – “sword”, is a reminder of: *by your sword you shall live and your brother you shall serve* (Gen. 27:40) Isaac’s blessing to Esau. Edom is throwing it right back at Israel.

במדבר כ':כ"ט

(כט) וַיִּרְאוּ כָל־הָעֵדָה כִּי גִוַע אֶהְיוּ וַיִּבְכוּ אֶת־אֶהְרֹן שְׁלֹשִׁים יוֹם כָּל בַּיִת יִשְׂרָאֵל: {ס}

Numbers 20:29

(29) *the whole community knew that Aaron had breathed his last. All the house of Israel bewailed Aaron thirty days.* Prior to Aaron’s death there is a ceremony of transfer. His priestly vestments are removed and placed on his son, **then**, he dies. In all other cases of dynastic succession, the death precedes the transfer; here the transfer precedes the death. There is simple practicality to this: by ‘investing’ Elazar prior to Aaron’s death, a) the vestments don’t become impure and, b) Elazar himself would be able to distance himself from his father prior to his death, further shielding him from any impurity. As the new Kohen Gadol, he needed to radiate life without any impairments.

במדבר כ"א:ז'

(ז) וַיִּבְאֹּוּ הָעָם אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמְרוּ הֲטֵאֵנוּ כִּי־דִבַּרְנוּ בְּה' נֹכַד הַתְּפִלָּה אֶל־ה' וְיִסַּר מֵעֲלֵינוּ אֶת־הַנְּחָשׁ וַיִּתְּפֹלֵל מֹשֶׁה בְּעַד הָעָם:

Numbers 21:7

(7) *The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you. Intercede with the LORD to take away the serpents from us!”* And Moses interceded for the people. This is the first example of their repentance. This indeed signals that a new generation emerging.

במדבר כ"א:י"ז

(יז) אָז יִשָּׂיר יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הַשִּׁירָה הַזֹּאת עָלֵי בְּאֵר עֵבְרוֹתָהּ:

Numbers 21:17

(17) *Then Israel sang this song: Spring up, O well—sing to it—* Tradition associates Miriam with the well in the desert. Could these verses be the people’s paean or ode to Miriam?

במדבר כ"א:כ"ב

(כב) אַעֲבֹרָה בְּאֶרְצְךָ לֹא נֹטֶה בְּשַׂדֵּה וּבְכָרְם לֹא נִשְׁתֶּה מִי בְּאֵר

Numbers 21:22

(22) *“Let me pass through your country. We will not turn off into fields or vineyards, and we will not drink water from wells...No success with the Amorites either. Sihon wages war and loses.*

במדבר כ"א:ל"ג

(לג) וַיִּפְגְּוּ וַיַּעֲלוּ דָרֶךְ הַבְּשָׁן וַיִּצְאָ עוֹג מֶלֶךְ־הַבְּשָׁן לְקִרְאִתְּהֶם...

Numbers 21:33

(33) *They marched on and went up the road to Bashan, and King Og of Bashan, came out. Sihon and Og: descendants of Ham, relatives of Canaan. Og finds a place in Jewish imagination as a colossus. Moses was ten cubits tall. He took an axe ten cubits long, jumped up ten cubits, and struck Og in the ankle and killed him. (Ber. 54b) Sip wine. Close eyes. Imagine. Shabbat Shalom!*