

Ekev: The 40 Day Motif
Rabbi Eliot Malomet August 24, 2024 20 Av 5784

In a year in which we have been astutely aware of days, (today is Day 323 of hostages' captivity) we note that yesterday, we commenced a 40-day countdown to Rosh



Hashanah. The 40-day motif figures prominently in Moses' parting speech to the Israelites. In recounting the last 40 years since the Exodus, he characterizes Israel as

a rebellious nation, and focuses specifically on the Sinai moment and specifically, on his reactions to the catastrophic worship of the Golden Calf. He states:

<p>בַּעֲלִיתִי הָהָרָה לְקַחַת לְיֹהֵת הָאֲבָנִים לְיֹהֵת הַבְּרִית אֲשֶׁר כָּרַת ה' עִמָּכֶם וְאָשֵׁב בְּהָר אֲרֻבָּעִים יוֹם וְאֲרֻבָּעִים לַיְלָה לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַלְתִּי וּמַיִם לֹא שָׁתִיתִי.</p>	<p><i>When I went up the mountain to receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that God had cut with you, I stayed on the mountain 40 days and 40 nights: food I did not eat, and water I did not drink;</i> (Deut. 9:9).</p>
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It was at the end of that 40-day period that God gave Moses the two tablets of the covenant. At the very same time, however, the people were engaged in the worship of the Golden Calf. God told him to descend the mountain and see

for himself what they were doing. At that moment, God made an extraordinarily angry statement resolving to destroy the people and make a new nation out of Moses:

<p>וְאֶמַחֶה אֶת שְׁמִי מִתַּחַת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶעֱשֶׂה אוֹתָךְ לְגוֹי עַצִּים רַב מִמֶּנּוּ.</p>	<p><i>I will blot out their name from beneath the heavens, and I will make of you a nation mightier [in number] and many-more than they!</i> (Deut. 9:11)</p>
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Moses does not reply. Rather, he recounts that he turned away and descended from the mountain. And he recounts that when he saw the sin with his own eyes, he smashed the tablets before their eyes. At that point, he goes back up the mountain for 40 days, and begs God not to destroy them:

<p>וְאֶתְנַפַּל לִפְנֵי ה' כְּרֹאשֹׁנָה אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים לַיְלָה לֶחֶם לֹא אָכַלְתִּי וּמַיִם לֹא שָׁתִיתִי עַל כָּל חַטֹּאתֶיכֶם אֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם לְעֵינֵי ה', לְהַכְעִיפוֹ.</p>	<p><i>I threw myself down before God - eating no bread and drinking no water 40 days and 40 nights, as before - because of all your sins that you sinned, by doing what was evil in the eyes of God, to infuriate him.</i> (Deut. 9:18)</p>
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Thus, at Mount Sinai we have two consecutive 40-day periods. The first for the first set of tablets, the second for the second set of tablets. At this point we should ask, what's the deal with 40 days? Nowhere does the Torah explain the significance of 40 days as opposed to any other number. To answer this question, let's examine the other places in the Bible where there are 40-day periods. Perhaps they all have something in common.

STORY	40 DAYS	SIGNIFICANCE	COMMENT:
NOAH AND THE FLOOD Gen. 7:4, 12, 17	The duration of rain during the Flood.	God destroys all life during the 40-day deluge. The world which teemed with life is now submerged. All creatures on earth die except for those on the Ark.	In each of these situations the 40-day period is a motif of transition. As he recounts his two 40-day periods on the mountain, Moses refers to two fundamentally different transformative experiences. In the first, he learns the laws of the Torah directly from God. This immersive experience enables him to become a lawgiver. After the crisis of the Golden Calf, he beseeches God to let him know God's ways (Exod. 33:13). When Moses ascends the mountain a second time, God situates him in the crag of a rock and shields him from his direct presence. When God's presence passes before Moses, Moses discerns God's true nature, that God is <i>compassio-</i>
NOAH AND THE FLOOD Gen. 8:6	The waiting period before Noah sends the raven.	After the rain ceased, the Ark settled on Mt. Ararat, for some time. Upon seeing the mountaintops Noah waits another 40 days to mark the end of the Flood and the return to life. After marking that passage of time, he opens the window and sends out the raven.	
JACOB IN EGYPT Gen. 50:3	The period for embalming of Jacob.	When Jacob dies, Joseph has him embalmed, which takes 40 days. Speculation: This possibly represents the transition from death to the afterlife in Egyptian mythology.	
MOSES Exod. 24:18	The time it takes for Moses to get the two tablets.	Exodus describes Moses going into the cloud-הָעֶנָן on the mountain and spending 40 days there. This spiritual period signifies a major transition in his life: Before Sinai and after Sinai. He is now a lawgiver in addition to a leader.	
MOSES Exod. 34:28	The period of Moses' intercession with God.	During this 40-day period Moses is with God-וַיְהִי שָׁם ה'. He prays for the people and convinces God not to destroy them. This period represents a transition in the life of the people, from the possibility of annihilation to the possibility of renewal.	

