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 vesterday, we commenced a 40-day countdown to Rosh



Hashanah. The 40-day motif figures prominently in Moses' parting speech to 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:

אַבְּעֲלֹתִי הָהָרָה לָקַחַת When I went up the mountain to לוחת האבנים לוחת receive the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant that God עַמְּכֶם <mark>וְאֵשֵׁב בָּהָר</mark> had cut with you, <mark>I stayed on the</mark> אַרְבָּעִים יוֹם וְאַרְבָּעִים mountain 40 days and 40 nights: food I did not eat, and water I did ומים לא שתיתי. *not drink;* (Deut. 9:9).

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:

וְאֶמְחֶה אֶת שְׁמְבּ I will blot out their name from beneath the heavens, and I will make of you a ואַעשה אותף לגוי nation mightier [in number] and עצום וָרֶב מְמֵנוּ. many-more than they! (Deut. 9:11)

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:

ואָתְנַפַּל לְפַנִי ה׳ I threw myself down before God eating no bread and drinking no water 40 days and 40 nights, as שָׁבֶלְתִּי וּמֵיִם לֹא שָׁתִיתִי before - because of all your sins על כַּל חַטַאתְכָם אֲשֵׁר that you sinned, by doing what was פעשות הָרע evil in the eyes of God, to infuriate הי להַכְעִיסוֹ. (Deut. 9:18)

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.

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STORY	40 DAYS	SIGNIFICANCE	
NOAH AND	The duration	God destroys all life during the 40-day deluge. The	
THE FLOOD	of rain during	world which teemed with life is now submerged.	
Gen. 7:4, 12, 17	the Flood.	All creatures on earth die except for those on the Ark.	
NOAH AND	The waiting	After the rain ceased, the Ark settled on Mt. Ararat, for	
THE FLOOD	period	some time. Upon seeing the mountaintops Noah	
Gen. 8:6	before Noah	waits another <mark>40 days</mark> to ma	rk the end of the Flood
	sends the	and the return to life. After n	narking that passage of
	raven.	time, he opens the window a	and sends out the raven.
JACOB IN	The period	When Jacob dies, Joseph ha	s him embalmed, which
EGYPT	for	takes <mark>40 days</mark> . Speculation: '	This possibly represents
Gen. 50:3	embalming	the transition from death to	the afterlife in Egyptian
	of Jacob.	mythology.	
MOSES	The time it	Exodus describes Moses goi	ing into the cloud-נָיָבאׁ מֹשֶה
Exod. 24:18	takes for	פְתוֹךְ הֶעֶנֶן on the mountain an	d spending <mark>40 days</mark> there.
	Moses to get	This spiritual period signifies	s a major transition in his
	the two	life: Before Sinai and after Si	inai. He is now a lawgiver
	tablets.	in addition to a leader.	
MOSES	The period of	During this <mark>40-day</mark> period Mo	oses is with God- וְיָהֵי שֶׁם
Exod. 34:28	Moses'	עם הי. He prays for the people	e and convinces God not
	intercession	to destroy them. This period	represents a transition in
	with God.	the life of the people, from t	he possibility of
		annihilation to the possibilit	y of renewal.

COMMENT:

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 compassio-

THE SCOUTS Num. 13:25, 14:34	The duration of the Scouts' mission in the Land.	During their 40-day journey, the scouts become skeptical about the future of the people in the land. This is a period in which doubt is allowed to fester in the scouts and in the people. This period marks the transition from the possibility of homecoming, a kind of life, to the certainty of exile, a kind of death.	
DAVID AND GOLIATH 1 Sam. 17:16 ELIJAH AND JEZEBEL 1 Kings 19:8	The duration of Goliath's taunts. Elijah goes without food on Mount Horeb.	The Philistine colossus subjects Israel to a 40-day barrage of verbal taunts. It didn't end well for him. With David victorious, the people are transformed. When Elijah escapes from Jezebel after killing 450 Baal prophets, he eats a meal that sustains him for 40 days of fasting, after which God speaks to him, echoing Moses' experience. This marks a transition to a new phase in Elijah's life.	
EZEKIEL Ezek. 4:6	Symbolic period of time.	Ezekiel lies on his side for 40 days to symbolize punishment for the House of Judah, and its transition from a state of sinfulness (death) to spiritual renewal (life).	
JONAH AND NINEVEH Jonah 3:4	Jonah's warning to the people of Nineveh.	God instructs Jonah to tell the people of Nineveh that they have 40 days to improve themselves otherwise they will be destroyed. This represents a transition from the certainty of death to the possibility of life.	

nate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in kindness and faithfulness אַל רַחום וְחַנוּן אָרֶךְ אַפַּיִם וְרַב חֶסֶד וַאֵּמֶת<mark>. (Exod. 34:6).</mark> Now with the knowledge that God is forgiving, Moses spends the next 40 days in prayer over the people's sin. This period reflects a transition not only for Moses but for the people. His 40 days of intercession convinces God to reverse the decree of annihilation and give the people a second chance to accept the covenant. It is a transition from divine anger to divine forgiveness, from the uneasy limbo of a broken covenantal relationship, to the stability and rectitude of a renewed covenantal one. It is, in other words, a transition from death to life.

Why 40? We could speculate a number of reasons as to why the period of transition is 40 days. Recovery from ordinary illness or injury usually takes 4-6 weeks, roughly 40 days. We all know quite intuitively that the transition back to full health takes time, and 40 days is a good benchmark. This is also true for some forms of psychotherapy, habit formation, detox programs and the like.¹

The 40-Day Fast. How do we interpret what Moses says repeatedly: **food I did not eat, and water I did not drink**? The Guinness World Record for the longest period a person can go without solid food is 382 days.² But most people can't last more than 30 days without food, or 3-7 days without water! We could simply say that Moses' survival was a miracle! On the other hand, we could read it figuratively and not become too burdened by the stretch of credulity here. The Torah is describing a type of fast. A very long fast, to be sure, but one whose main purpose was spiritual, or according to the rabbis, a fast that will enable him to be like one of the ministering angels (Avot deRabbi Natan 1:1). The exact details are not important. In Judaism we fast out of grief and lamentation (as in Tisha B'av), to re-enact a temporary experience of trauma, in which eating and experiencing physical pleasure is something we have no desire for. We also fast out of a desire to induce a deeper

TODAY IS DAY 323. WE PRAY THAT THE HOSTAGES WILL BE FREED. BRING THEM HOME NOW! MAY GOD HEAL THE WOUNDED AND SHIELD ISRAEL. spiritual experience, (as in Yom Kippur). By focusing less on the body, we can concentrate more on the soul. Rabbi Alan Lew, z'l, in his wonderful book, This Is Real and You Are Completely Unprepared: The Days of Awe as a Journey of Transformation, discusses the fasting of Yom Kippur as a rehearsal for death. You wear a shroud and, like a dead person, you neither eat or drink... You summon the desperate strength of life's last moments... This is your last chance. Everyone has run out of time. Every heart has broken. The gate clangs shut, the great horn sounds one last time. You feel curiously lighthearted and clean. Fasting cleanses and purifies you. But fasting is also a mini-death. Moses' two 40-day fast experiences enabled him to transition from being an ordinary human being into an extraordinary spiritual being, unconcerned about his body. But they were also simulations of death and rebirth, the first time when he received the tablets, and the second time when he achieved forgiveness for the people and brought down the second set of tablets. As we enter this period of 40 days prior to Rosh Hashanah, may it be one of renewal and reinvigoration, despite the challenges that we are currently experiencing in Israel and throughout the world. **Shabbat Shalom!**

This Parasha Sheet is sponsored by Suzy Levin to commemorate the Yahrzeit of her mother Carol Levin, z'l.

¹ The term quarantine is derived from the Italian, quaranta giorni, which means 40 days. The practice originated in the 14th century in Venice. Arriving ships were embargoed for 40 days in order to prevent the spread of diseases.

² Angus Barbieri (UK) (b. 1940) of Tayport, Fife, who lived on tea, coffee, water, soda water and vitamins in Maryfield Hospital, Dundee, Angus, from June 1965 to July 1966. He went from 472 to 178 lbs. a loss of 294 lbs!