

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Chukat
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Chukat – A small insight into how Chazal interpret pesukim

In this week's Parsha of Chukat we read about the death of Miriam and Aaron. We also read about Moshe's sin of hitting the rock which leads to his missing out on entering the Land with Bnei Yisrael. But Hashem always brings the cure before the disease. The Parasha starts with the laws of the Parah Adumah, the red heifer, which is the antidote to impurity caused by death. Let's focus in on Aaron's death, and a very surprising Rashi.

The news of Aaron's impending passing is described in the Torah as follows:

(22) They journeyed from Kadesh and the entire congregation of Bnei Yisrael arrived at Mount Hor.

(23) Hashem said to Moshe and Aaron at Mount Hor, on the border of the land of Edom, saying:

(24) Aaron shall be gathered to his people [i.e., he will pass away], for he shall not come to the Land that I have given to Bnei Yisrael, because you defied My word at the waters of dispute [mei merivah]¹

In his commentary on pasuk 23, Rashi quotes a Midrash which makes a surprising connection:²

This teaches that because they [Bnei Yisrael] had some connection with the wicked Eisav, by coming close to his descendants [Edom], a breach was made in their undertakings [i.e., they were unsuccessful] and they lost this Tzaddik [Aaron]. This is similar to what the Prophet said to Yehoshophat³, “because you joined with Achaziah⁴, Hashem has caused a breach in your undertakings [i.e., you were unsuccessful]”.

How did the Midrash know that Aaron's death was connected with the fact that Bnei Yisrael were camped close to Edom? Perhaps the Torah was just informing us of a geographic fact? If you read the pesukim carefully you might be able to work out what led the Midrash to make this connection. Have a try by rereading the above pesukim before reading ahead.

The Beer BaSadeh,⁵ one of the “super-commentaries” which analyse Rashi's commentary, makes a brilliant observation. Mount Hor was first mentioned in pasuk 22. If the “border of the land of Edom” was only stated to teach us the geographic location of Mount Hor, it should have been mentioned in pasuk 22 and not in pasuk 23. The fact that it was only mentioned in pasuk 23, immediately before Hashem informed us of Aaron's death, teaches us that there must be a connection between Aaron's death and the location of Bnei Yisrael near Edom.⁶ This interpretation demonstrates how exquisitely sensitive Chazal were to every nuance in the text.

¹ Bamidbar 20:22-24.

² Rashi is quoting the Midrash Tanchuma.

³ A righteous king of the southern kingdom of Yehuda.

⁴ A wicked king of the northern kingdom of Israel.

⁵ Written by Rabbi Meir Binyamin Menachem Danon, early 19th Century, Bosnia and later Jerusalem. His student, Rabbi Eliezer Papo, is the author of the well-known Pele Yoetz.

⁶ When you think about it, it sounds obvious. As is often the case, when we are told something that is brilliant it appears to be self-evident. The genius is the one that is able to work it out the first time.

Rashi's commentary provides another example of the negative effects of attaching oneself to a wicked person. Yehoshophat was the fourth king of the southern kingdom of Yehuda. He was exceedingly righteous. He is compared favourably with his ancestor King David⁷ and he merited a miraculous victory over his enemies. However, in his desire for peace, Yehoshophat tried a number of times to forge an alliance with the wicked and idolatrous kings of the northern kingdom of Israel and he joined with them in military campaigns. At one point, Yehoshophat agreed to join with Achaziah, the wicked king of the northern kingdom of Israel, to build a large fleet of ships for the purpose of trade. Yehoshophat was criticised by the prophet Eliezer ben Dodavah for his joint venture with the wicked Achaziah, with the words that Rashi quoted in our context above: "because you joined with Achaziah, Hashem has caused a breach in your undertakings [i.e., you were unsuccessful]". A storm destroyed the entire fleet of ships. To his credit, Yehoshophat learned his lesson. When Achaziah suggested that they try again, and that this time he supplies the sailors, Yehoshophat refused.⁸ But unfortunately, Yehoshophat's son Yehoram married Ataliah, from the royal family of the northern kingdom of Israel. The results were disastrous. Yehoram had a short and unsuccessful reign and then Ataliah seized the throne. Thus began a dark and tragic period for the kingdom of Yehuda.

Thus, even though Yehoshophat was a very great Tzaddik, and even though his intentions were pure, he was punished for mixing too closely with wicked people. And as a result, Hashem caused "a breach in his undertakings".

However, in the case of our Parsha, it merely seems that Bnei Yisrael just happened to be camped close to Edom. They didn't even choose to camp there – their journeys in the Midbar were guided by Hashem. Why would that cause Aaron's death? Furthermore, the pesukim that we quoted above actually give another reason for Aaron's death. He was implicated in the waters of dispute (mei merivah) when Moshe hit the rock to bring forth water, instead of talking to it. So why does the Midrash draw a connection between Aaron's death and the Edomites?

Perhaps we can suggest that Bnei Yisrael should have made more of an effort to keep their distance from the Edomites, even though they were camped geographically close by. Perhaps they mixed with the Edomites too much and allowed themselves to become influenced by their behaviour.⁹ In any case, the Midrash is not suggesting that the only reason for Aaron's death was the fact that Bnei Yisrael had come close to Eisav's descendants. Clearly, there can be more than one cause for each effect. For whatever reason, Hashem had decided that it was now time for Aaron to pass away. But by linking his death with the proximity of Bnei Yisrael to Edom, the Torah and the Midrash are teaching us the important lesson of not mixing with the wrong crowd.

There is a grave spiritual danger in mixing with evil people. This theme comes up often in the Torah literature. The very first verse in sefer Tehillim teaches us this message: "The praises of a man are that he did not follow the counsel of the wicked, neither did he stand in the way of sinners nor sit in the company of scorners." In Michtav MiEliyahu, Rav Dessler explains that just as there are physical germs which are contagious, there are also spiritual germs which are contagious and can contaminate. The Mishnah in Pirkai Avot teaches us: "Distance yourself from a bad neighbour, do not cleave to a wicked person". These words can and should be taken literally. Even entering into close proximity of evil people can be dangerous.

Let's try something this week:

Try hard not to associate or mingle with people who are a negative influence and might encourage us to lower our standards of behaviour.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁷ Divrei Hayamim II 17:3.

⁸ Kli Yakar.

⁹ The nature of the interactions between Bnei Yisrael and the Edomites is complex. Earlier in our Parasha, we read that the Edomites did not let Bnei Yisrael pass through their land, and they came out with their military forces. Bnei Yisrael were commanded not to attack the Edomites, so they were forced to turn away. However, there is also a suggestion that Bnei Yisrael did engage in commerce with the Edomites and they purchased food and water from them (see Ramban's commentary to Devarim 2:6-7).