

PARSHAS MATOS: DRAWING A CONNECTION

by Rabbi Yaakov Horowitz

Sefer Bamidbar describes the travels of the Bnei Yisroel in the desert over the forty-year period that began with the miraculous exodus from Mitzrayim and ended with the Jews poised to enter the Promised Land of Eretz Yisroel.

Parshas Masei concludes Sefer Bamidbar with a listing of each of the forty- two encampments of the Jews in the desert. Rashi comments that although the B'nei Yisroel were forced to pick up their tent stakes and relocate in the midbar numerous times, Hashem's mercy is still evident. The Jews were punished for the sin of listening to the meraglim (spies) by being forced to "wander in the desert for forty years (Bamidbar 14:33)." Rashi point out that aside from fourteen relocations during the first year that they left Egypt and eight during the fortieth year, there were only twenty moves during a thirty-eight year period of relative tranquility.

The other main topic mentioned in this week's parsha is the halachos (laws) related to one who kills accidentally. The Torah notes that once such a tragic event occurs, the person who took the life of another, albeit inadvertently, is required to immediately run to an Ir Miklat (a "city of refuge"), where he remains until the death of the Kohein Gadol.

DRAWING A CONNECTION

The Kli Yakar connects these two seemingly disparate portions of this week's parsha by pointing out that there were forty-two cities that were inhabited by members of Shevet Levi that were not formally designated as 'cities of refuge.' Nonetheless, they offered protection to people who killed accidentally.

The Kli Yakar notes that these forty-two cities correspond to the forty- two encampments of the Jews in the desert. He explains that Hashem, in His infinite mercy, arranged that the cities of refuge were those designated for Shevet Levi. Members of Shevet Levi did not own portions in Eretz Yisroel, but rather lived in these cities.

Hashem lessened the discomfort of those who were exiled to arei miklat by sending them to cities where the leviyim were also landless. Yosef Hatzadik (Bereishis 47:21, see Rashi) acted in a similar fashion, resettling all the Egyptians during his reign to remove the stigma of 'agerim' (exiles) from his brothers.

ANOTHER POSSIBILITY

I would like to suggest a second reason for the linkage between the encampments of the B'nei Yisroel in the midbar and the halachos of the arei miklat - one that goes to the root of the imposition of galus.

We are familiar with the concept that Hashem does not discriminate deliver punishments for sins that we commit. Rather, His middas hadin is delivered middah k'neged middah (there is a direct correlation between the crime and the punishment). That being the case, what is the connection between the averah of killing accidentally and being sent to an ir miklat?

I would like to suggest a direct linkage between the two - one that would explain the juxtaposition of the encampments of the Jews in the desert alongside the halachos of ir miklat.

TAKING A LIFE - AND LOSING ONE'S OWN

The taking of a human life - even accidentally - is an act of such magnitude that the perpetrator should lose his or her life as well. However, it would certainly be overly harsh to kill someone whose crime was committed accidentally.

A SYMBOLIC TAKING OF LIFE

I would like to suggest that going to exile is similar to losing one's life - and starting anew. Over the course of our lives, we establish our reputations, create and develop friendships, and stake our claims in our communities. When one abruptly pulls up his or her roots and is forced to relocate, it is, in many ways, like starting life anew.

Thus, when one kills accidentally, it is perfectly symmetrical that he relinquishes his current life. We do not take his life completely, as we recognize the inadvertent nature of his misdeed. However, it is fitting that he leaves behind all that he had built up over the years and start life anew.

WANDERING IN THE DESERT

Seen in this light, we can attain a fresh perspective on the wandering of the Jews in the desert. Hashem initially wanted to take their lives (Bamidbar 14:12) after they had sinned with the incident of the meraglim. After Moshe Rabbeinu begged Hashem for mercy on behalf of the Jews, He spared their lives, but gave them a sentence of galus - a symbolic death - and instructed them to wander in the desert for forty years.

There is, in fact, another striking similarity between the galus of the Jews and that of an accidental murderer. The Jews in the desert never knew when they would be asked to move. When the miraculous cloud rose, they needed to pack their belongings and move on to the next location. In the instance of the ir miklat, the murderer's galus ended with the death of the Kohein Gadol - an event that could not be predicted. In both cases, there was no predetermined time for the relocation to end - adding to the sense of instability.

A COMFORTING MESSAGE

Perhaps this is why the parsha of Masei is read during the 'three-week' mourning period. In the midst of our commemoration of this long and bitter galus, one that is seemingly without end, we are reminded of Hashem's mercy - even when He delivers middas hadin.

Even when His children were sentenced to death in the midbar, Hashem miraculously provided all their needs; food, water, and shelter for a period of forty years. As Rashi explains, He even grouped their moves in the desert to allow them longer periods of tranquility. So too, were the needs of an accidental murderer taken care of in every detail (see gemorah makkos perek beis).

Like a loving Father who disciplines his child while taking care of his needs, Hashem's boundless love for us is evident in these two interconnected portions of this parsha.

May this be a source of comfort to us in these difficult days.

Best wishes for a Gutten Shabbos

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