

The Torah Portions They Never Told Us About
An Overdose of Spirituality
Melton Geshar at JCC, November 26, 2012
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- A) Review/Overview – Numbers 1 – 9; the first month and a half of the second year
- 1) Commandment to keep the Passover, including the commandment of Pesach Shaney
 - 2) Gifts of oxen and wagons to the Tabernacle
 - 3) Twelve day ceremony of gifts of the chieftains to the Tabernacle
 - 4) Census of the tribes
 - 5) Census of the Levites and firstborn and their interchange
 - 6) Appointment of the Levites to their tasks in carrying the Tabernacle
 - 7) Arrangement of the camp for the journey
- B) The actual beginning of the journey
- 1) Chapter 9, verses 15 – 23 – the role of the cloud of God עמוד ענן
 - 2) Chapter 10, verses 1 – 10 – the trumpets
 - 3) Chapter 10, verses 11 – 28 – breaking camp
 - 4) Chapter 10, verses 29 – 32 – Hovav, Moshe's father in law
 - a) Do you notice anything wrong?
 - 5) Chapter 10, verses 33 – 36 – The Ark of the Covenant leads the way
- C) Chapter 11, verses 1 – 3 - The first complaint of many
- 1) Rashi on verse 1
the outskirts of the camp: Heb. הַמְתַּנְּה בְּקֵצָה. Those who were distinguishable because of their lowliness—these were the mixed multitude (See Exod. 12:36). Rabbi Shimon ben Menashia says, The most distinguished (קְצִינִים) among them and the most prominent. — [Sifrei Beha'alothecha 1:42:1]
 - a) If the outskirts are only a geographically reference, then the choice of whom to punish would appear to be completely arbitrary.
 - b) Rather the reference is sociological
 - (I) If the reference is to the bottom rung of the social ladder, then it means the mixed multitude who were not of Israelite stock
 - Blaming the outsiders
 - There is a whole strand of biblical commentary that blames the mixed multitude for everything that went wrong
 - See verse 4 in this chapter
 - (II) If the reference is to the top rung of the social scale, then why would the elite desire to be punished? For this we must search someplace else
 - 2) Exodus chapter 24, verses 1 – 2, 9 – 14
 - a) Difficulties
 - (I) How could they have seen God, for it says in Exodus 33, verse 20 that “no man shall see me and live”?
 - (II) Why would it say that God did not raise his hand against them? Does it imply that there was a reason to raise his hand against them?
 - (III) Why does it say that they act and they drank in the context of such a lofty a spiritual experience?
 - b) Rashi's answer
and they perceived the God of Israel: They gazed and peered and [because of this] were sentenced to die, but the Holy One, blessed is He, did not want to disturb the rejoicing of [this moment of the giving of] the Torah. So He waited for Nadav and Avihu [i.e., to kill them,] until the day of the dedication of the Mishkan, and for [the death of] the elders until [the following incident:] “And the people

were as if seeking complaints... and a fire of the Lord broke out against them and devoured at the edge (בְּקֶצֶה) of the camp” (Num. 11:1). [בְּקֶצֶה denotes] the most distinguished (בְּקֶצֶה) of the camp [i.e., the elders]. -[From Midrash Tanchuma Beha’alothecha 16]

And upon the nobles: They are Nadav and Avihu and the elders. -[From Midrash Tanchuma Beha’alothecha 16]

He did not lay His hand: This indicates that they deserved that a hand be laid upon them.

and they perceived God: They gazed at Him with levity, while [they were] eating and drinking. So is the [interpretation of] Midrash Tanchuma (Beha’alothecha 16).

c) Their sin is an overdose of spirituality, overstepping boundaries.

(I) But what’s wrong with that?

- God does not want us to leave this world in favor of an upper world
- Mysticism tends to be extremely individualistic
- It chafes against community institutions and tends to oppose them
- It often becomes antinomian

3) Leviticus chapter 10, verses 1 – 3

a) Rashi’s commentary

And fire went forth: Rabbi Eliezer says: Aaron’s sons died only because they rendered halachic decisions in the presence of Moses, their teacher. Rabbi Ishmael says: [They died because] they had entered the sanctuary after having drunk wine.

This is what the Lord meant: But when did He speak? [It was when He said], “And I will meet with the children of Israel, and it will be sanctified through My glory (בְּכְבוֹדִי)” (Exod. 29:43). Do not read בְּכְבוֹדִי, “through My glory,” but בְּמִכְבְּדֵי, “through My honorable ones.” Moses said to Aaron, “Aaron, my brother! I knew that this House was to be sanctified through the beloved ones of the Omnipresent, but I thought it would be either through me or through you. Now I see that they [Nadav and Avihu] were greater than I or you!”- [Vayikra Rabbah 12:2]

(I) “Rendering halachic decisions in the presence of Moses” is about the breaking down of lines of authority and of community institutions

(II) They were indeed great people, and it is their greatness, their quest for God and transcendence, that caused their downfall. Their quest was a good and proper one, but it went one step too far.

(III) Tractate Succa – The greater the man, the greater his (evil) impulse

4) Mei haShiloach on Nadav and Avihu

5) Rav Abraham Isaac haCohen Kook, Souls of the World of Chaos

6) Full circle

a) Spiritual elitism and its ramifications is just as corrosive to the community as is the base rebellion of the selfish and the short sighted