

The Torah Portions They Never Told Us About
Numbers chapters 20 - 21 – A New Generation
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- A The events that have taken place since leaving Mt. Sinai in chapter 10 on the 20th day of the second month of the second year.
- I Complaint at Tavera
 - II Complaint at Kivrot haTa'ava over the lack of meat
 - III Complaint of Aaron and Miriam against Moshe
 - IV The tourists/spies
 - V The Ma'apilim
 - VI [The stick gatherer]
 - VII Korach's rebellion
 - VIII Quarrel of the People with Moshe at Mei Merivah
- B Numbers chapter 20, verse 1 – Chronology and Geography
- I "In the first month"
 - a Whenever the Torah says the first month, or the third month, and does not say which day of the month, it means the first of the month. That is, the Hebrew word for month, חודש, can also mean new moon.
 - 1 Exodus 19:1
 - 2 Exodus 40:17
 - 3 Numbers 9:1
 - b So this is the first day of the first month, the day that God declared in Exodus 12:1-2 as the beginning of the Jewish calendar
 - c It is an auspicious day, a day for new beginnings.
 - II It appears that Tzin and Kadash are synonymous, or that Kadash is a place in the desert of Tzin.
 - a Numbers 33:36 – Here in the list of encampments in the desert we see that Tzin is Kadesh, and it is at the very end of the desert encampments.
 - b Numbers 13: 21 and 26 – The tourists/spies were sent out from Tzin which is Kadash.
 - c Numbers 34:4 – Tzin / Kadesh Barna'a are at the southern boundary of the Holy Land
 - III It appears that when the Israelites left Mt. Sinai and arrived at Tzin within 3 or so months, they were poised to enter the land then and there. In the aftermath of the incident of the spies, they were sent back to the desert. Now in chapter 20 God has brought them back to where they started, presumably in order to now enter the Holy Land.
 - a That would mean that the years of wandering are over, that is, that we have reached the 40th year after the Exodus.
 - b That means that 39 years have passed in chapters 15 through 19.
- C Overview of Events in chapters 20 – 21, with map. It should be noted that there are an abundance of historical and geographical difficulties in these chapters, all of which will not concern us.
- I Quarrel against Moshe
 - a Reaction of God, Moshe and Aaron

- b God's announcement that the leaders have sinned and must be punished.
 - II Moshe sends messengers to Edom, asking to pass through their land on the way to Canaan.
 - a The Edomites refuse twice, and threaten the Israelites with attack.
 - b Israel turned away and marched in a different direction.
 - III The Israelites proceed to Mount Hor, where Aaron dies.
 - IV The Israelites proceed by way of the Atarim, apparently traveling northeast, and are attacked by the Canaanites of Arad.
 - a The Canaanites take captives.
 - b Israel vows to proscribe the towns if God comes to their aid in battle.
 - c Israel counterattacks and is victorious.
 - d Israel fulfills its vow, and names the place Hormah, meaning proscription.
 - V The Israelites proceed by way of the Red Sea, apparently turning south.
 - a The people speak against God and Moshe.
 - b God punishes the people with serpents, and many are killed.
 - c The people repent.
 - d God commands Moshe to put a cooper serpent on a standard; whoever looks at it will recover.
 - VI The Israelites proceed northeast through what is today Transjordan, to the east of Edom and Moav.
 - a The people sing the song of the well.
 - VII The Israelites send messengers to Sihon king of the Amorites, asking to pass through his land, apparently in order to travel northwest.
 - a Passage is refused and the Amorites attack but are defeated.
 - b Israel occupies the towns of the Amorites.
 - c Israelite forces are sent north and capture Bashan.
 - VIII The Israelites encamp across the Jordan from Jericho.
- D Has anything changed after 40 years?
 - I The younger generation seems to be as bad as their parents, who were punished by God with death in the desert. Has no lesson been learned?
 - a Chapter 20, verses 2 – 5
 - b Chapter 21, verses 4 – 6
 - II But our sages had a different perspective: *"And God distinguished between the light and the darkness"* – This alludes to *Sefer Bamidbar*, which distinguishes between [the generation that] left Egypt and those who entered the Land. (*Bereishit Rabba* 3:5) Where did they get this perspective from?
 - a The complaint about lack of water should be compared to the parallel complaint of the previous generation, in *Shmot* chapter 17, verses 1 – 4.
 - 1 The people idealize life in Egypt, where there was water, and would want to go back.
 - 2 But the younger generation is thinking of the Land of Israel; their complaint is that they were taken out of Egypt without the promise of entering a land of land of grain and fig and vines and pomegranates being fulfilled. They are longer forward as opposed to looking backward. They are

- anxious and impatient to enter the Land. Their complaint is 'are we there yet?'
- 3 So compared to their parents, they are still spiritually and emotionally immature, but we do see an improvement.
- b Compare to what we find in Korach's rebellion, in Bmidbar chapter 16, verses 12 – 14.
- 1 Dathan and Aviram are derisive of the promise of the Land of Israel. In their mind Egypt was the promised land.
 - 2 The next generation is not derisive, rather confident and impatient.
- c The complaint about bread and the manna must also be seen in its context: chapter 21, verses 1 – 4.
- 1 The way north seems to have opened up, yet the camp turns south. It appears that instead of moving forward towards the Land of Israel, they are going back to Egypt! This association is certainly found in the words 'Sea of Reeds'! This is what triggers the complaint. This is the opposite of the mindset of their parents.
 - 2 The word Hormah in verse 3 ties up back to the Ma'apilim in chapter 14, verses 39 – 45. The people may be remembering what their parents experienced and be feeling a jarring dissonance. Our parents sinned, were defeated at Hormah, and were directed back to the desert wilderness. We have not sinned, were victorious at Hormah, and nevertheless are being directed back to the desert wilderness!
 - 3 Look carefully at chapter 21, verses 4b – 5. What they are saying that we are fed up with travel rations, and we want to get there already!
 - 4 So they still complain, but at least they identify with the goal of reaching the Land.
- d The generation that left Egypt never expressed any real remorse for their complaints. (It is true that in chapter 14, verse 40, they said that they had sinned, but it was while they were preparing to sin again!)
- 1 Chapter 21, verses 4b – 7, here the people understand and admit their sin! They have learned a degree of self reflection and personal responsibility.
- e The generation that left Egypt were slaves both in body and soul. They could not be immediately made into free people. Rather, their slavish allegiance to Pharaoh had first to be simply transferred to God.
- 1 Just as the Israelites sing a song of thanksgiving to God after their salvation through water at the Sea of Reeds, so do they sing a song of salvation concerning the water in the Book of Numbers.
 - i In the first instance, the song is completely about the deeds of God. The Israelites passively received their salvation.
 - ii Here in chapter 21, verses 16 – 18, they sing a song of thanksgiving that also recounts their own

initiative. They seem to have learned a degree of responsibility.

- f The slavishness of the parents shows up in the children at the outset, but soon after the second generation learns responsibility.*
 - 1 Chapter 20, verses 4 – 21
 - i Moshe sends the messengers.
 - ii When threatened the Israelites retreat.
 - 2 Chapter 21, verses 1 – 3
 - i The Israelites are threatened and respond proactively.
 - 3 Chapter 21, verses 21 – 24
 - i Not Moshe, but Israel sends out messengers.
 - ii The Israelites respond to the threat proactively.
 - 4 Chapter 21, verse 32
 - 5 Chapter 21, verses 33 - 35

* Admittedly, Sefer Devarim has a different take on the matter, but it could be that one should not learn from the perspective of Devarim concerning the perspective of Bmidbar.

Sources:

JPS Torah Commentary

VBM shiur of Rav Yair Kahan on Parshat Hukat, “The Emergence of the Second Generation”

VBM shiur of Rav Amnon Bazak on Parshat Hukat, “Bnei Yisrael-The New Generation”