

PARASHAT KORACH

The Symbolic Significance of the Earth "Opening her Mouth"

By Rav Yonatan Grossman

The punishment of Datan and Aviram – being swallowed up by the earth – deviates from the usual forms of punishment in the Torah. It certainly has no parallel in the legal forms of capital punishment administered by courts (such as stoning), but it deviates even from the forms of Divine justice meted out to sinners. Nowhere else in Tanakh do we find a phenomenon akin to the earth opening up and swallowing people alive; its appearance in our parasha therefore demands some explanation.

META-EXEGETICAL INTRODUCTION

Before attempting to grasp the symbolic significance of this punishment, let us first establish whether such an exegetical aim is legitimate. This question arises in an interesting midrash describing a conversation between R. Yehoshua (or Rabban Gamliel, according to a different version) and "a certain gentile," concerning God's revelation to Moshe on Har Sinai:

"A certain gentile asked R. Yehoshua ben Korcha: 'Why did God choose to speak to Moshe from the midst of a bush [a lowly form of vegetation]?'"

He answered him: 'Had He spoken to him from the midst of a carob tree or a sycamore, you would have asked the same question! But since I cannot leave you without an answer, [I will respond]: Why from a [lowly] bush? To teach you that there is no place that is devoid of the Divine Presence.'"^[1]

The gentile's question assumes that there is some significance to the fact that God chose to reveal Himself to Moshe specifically in the bush, and it is this significance that he wants to clarify. R. Yehoshua's response undermines the very quest to uncover symbolism in this phenomenon: "Had He spoken to him from the midst of a carob or a sycamore, you would have asked the same question!" In other words, since God chose to reveal Himself within our physical reality, He chose an item of vegetation – but this choice gives no special significance to the tree or bush that He selected. Had the revelation been from the midst of a carob tree, the gentile would ask:

"Why specifically a carob?" The text, however, focuses on the actual revelation of God to Moshe, regardless of the type of tree in question.[2]

R. Yehoshua negates the search for symbolic meaning in the forms of Divine revelation. We may assume that he believes that God revealed Himself to Moshe from the midst of a bush because that type of vegetation is commonly found in the desert (or some suchlike "incidental" explanation).[3]

If R. Yehoshua's response were the last word on the subject, we could assume that this represents the generally accepted attitude among Chazal. But alongside R. Yehoshua's approach, there are numerous opinions that do in fact read symbolic meaning in God's revelation in the bush. For example:

"Just as this bush is lower than all the other trees in the world, so had Israel stooped to the lowest possible level, and the Holy One descended with them and redeemed them."

"Because it is pure: the nations of the world do not use it in their idolatrous practices."

"Just as the bush is hardier than all the other trees in the world – no bird that enters it will emerge safely, for it tears her limb from limb – so was Israel's subjugation in Egypt more difficult than any subjugation in the world."

"This bush – if a man puts his hand into it, he does not feel it, but when he tries to take his hand out he is scratched; likewise, when Israel went down to Egypt no one noticed them, but when they came out it was with miracles and wonders and war."

"Just as this bush is used as a fence around a garden, so Israel is like a fence for the world."[4]

Thus we learn that among Chazal there is some debate as to whether it is legitimate to try to explain the concrete expressions of a general phenomenon, or whether only the general idea should be addressed. (Is it proper to discuss the form of revelation in the bush, or only the actual revelation of God to Moshe?)

A sort of middle path in between these two approaches would suggest that each incident should be evaluated individually. Does the text itself contain any hint of there being symbolic significance to the objects or phenomena mentioned, beyond their contribution to the story itself? Thus, for example, if we examine the verses describing God's revelation to Moshe in the bush, we note that the text itself emphasizes that God was revealed in a bush (in the space of two verses the bush is mentioned five times). Hence, it is not a minor detail in the story, but rather a subject worthy of our attention.

"GOD WILL CREATE A CREATION"

It would seem that in the death of Datan and Aviram, too, the Torah emphasizes the form of punishment and not only the fact that they died, thus hinting at the symbolic significance of their strange death. For the purposes of comparison, let us keep in mind the punishment of those who desired meat, at the beginning of Bnei Yisrael's journey through the desert: "God's anger burned against the nation, and God struck the nation with a very great blow" (Bamidbar 11:33). In this formulation, it is clear that the point is not the form of punishment – of which there is actually no mention – but rather the very anger of God, and the death of the sinners.

In sharp contrast, the form of punishment of Datan and Aviram is emphasized in Moshe's speech to the point where this becomes the focus, rather than their death itself:

"Moshe said: By this you shall know that God has sent me to do all these things, and that it is not on my own initiative. If these people should die like the death of anyone else, and the same end that comes to all men comes also to them, then it is not God Who has sent me. But if God creates a creation and the earth opens her mouth and swallows them and all that is theirs, and they descend alive to Sheol, then you shall know that these people have rebelled against God." (16:28-30)

The punishment of Datan and Aviram is presented by Moshe not just as a blow to the sinners, but as a test of both the truth of his words and the authenticity of his mission as a prophet of God.

Moshe makes use of the verb "to know": "By this SHALL YOU KNOW that God has sent me... AND YOU SHALL KNOW that these people have rebelled against God." In other words, the death of Datan and Aviram is meant to convey an educational message: the nation should know that God has sent Moshe! The "testing" aspect of the punishment, then, relates to the way in which they are to die, and this is to be through a "new creation."

Since the way in which Datan and Aviram died is such an important issue in the story, it is clear that we should address the "new creation" that God introduces in order to punish them, and the reason for this specific phenomenon rather than any other.

"THEY SINNED IN OPENING THEIR MOUTHS"

In Moshe's speech about what is going to happen, as well as in the text's description of what actually happens, there is an interesting personification of the earth: it is described as "opening its mouth" and as devouring the sinners. Moshe declares, "The earth shall open its mouth and swallow them," and the narrative confirms, "The earth opened its mouth and devoured them."

This is a most surprising description. It would seem that the immediate association in the minds of most readers would be one of burial, not of devouring. The sudden disappearance into the

earth, being engulfed by it and having the earth cover over all that entered, brings to mind the punishment decreed for Adam (Bereishit 3:19):

"Until YOUR RETURN to the earth,
FOR from it you were taken,
FOR you are dust,
and unto dust YOU SHALL RETURN." [5]

Now Datan and Aviram "return" to the earth from which they were created, before their time. Some would suggest that Moshe's use of the uncommon term "creation" is meant to associate this incident with the description of man's lifecycle in Bereishit – birth and return to the earth.

But this is not the association that the text is trying to convey. [6] The Torah's formulation compares this premature entry into the bowels of the earth to the sinners' being "eaten." This can link our narrative to the punishment of Kayin for the murder of his brother Hevel. There too, the text uses the same image (and the same words):

"Now you are cursed from the earth WHICH OPENED ITS MOUTH to accept the blood of your brother from your hand." (Bereishit 4:11)

Whether or not this connection contributes towards our understanding of the punishment of Datan and Aviram, Abarbanel perceives in this personification of the earth a hint at the essence of the punishment, and an explanation of why specifically this punishment was selected:

"Moshe requested that the punishment of Datan and Aviram and their cohorts would be that they would be swallowed by the earth, such that they would be punished 'measure for measure.' They sinned by opening their mouths without license, to devour and destroy the master of all prophets, they themselves being despicable and lowly. Likewise, the earth – which is the lowest of the elements – would open its mouth, and swallow them." [7]

According to this view, the punishment of Datan and Aviram contains is based on "measure for measure": in their rebellion they made use of their mouths, and so the earth likewise would open its mouth and swallow these insolent speakers.

"THEY CAN ONLY DESCEND"

Rashi also explains the punishment in terms of "measure for measure," but for him this principle finds expression not in terms of substance but rather on the linguistic level. In Datan and

Aviram's refusal to come to Moshe when they are called, they declare: "We shall not come up." Hence, Rashi (16:12) explains, "Their mouths give them away: they can only descend."

According to Rashi, then, the "measure for measure" punishment is emphasized in the text linguistically, through the contrasting of the verbs "a-l-h" (to ascend) and "y-r-d" (to descend). Indeed, a broader examination of Datan and Aviram's rebellion against Moshe displays extensive use of these verbs:

"They said, 'We shall NOT COME UP (lo na'aleh). Is it not enough that you have BROUGHT US UP (he-elitanu) from a land flowing with milk and honey to make us die in the desert... WE SHALL NOT COME UP...'

'RISE UP (he'alu) from around the encampment of Korach, Datan and Aviram'... AND THEY AROSE (va-ye'alu) from upon the encampment of Korach, Datan and Aviram around...

'AND THEY SHALL DESCEND (ve-yardu) alive to Sheol, and you shall know that these people have rebelled against God'...

AND THEY DESCENDED (va-yerdu): they and all that was theirs, alive, to Sheol, and the earth covered them over, and they were gone from amongst the congregation."

In their defiant speech, Datan and Aviram make mention of the verb "a-l-h" three times. Correspondingly, Moshe uses the verb "y-r-d." (He also makes mention of the verb "a-l-h" in relation to the crowd standing about, emphasizing their severing themselves from Datan and Aviram.)

Moreover, the use that Datan and Aviram make of the verb "a-l-h" in their speech is most significant, and it is against this background that we must understand Rashi's teaching that their punishment is specifically related to a veiled contrast with this verb.

Their negation of ascent ("We shall not come up") is clearly important, for it is mentioned both at the beginning of their speech and at its end. Rashbam notes this literary framework:

"[This is an instance of the pattern of] the general idea, followed by the details, and concluding with the general idea once again. At first they say, 'We shall not come up,' then they explain why not, and then they return to the general statement: Therefore 'we shall not come up.'"

This outline emphasizes their refusal to "come up" – ascend – to Moshe. Perhaps, from a topographical point of view, the Ohel Mo'ed was indeed situated on a hill that was slightly raised above the level of the rest of the camp (symbolizing its importance).[8] It is also possible that the use of this verb in the context of approaching the Ohel Mo'ed is unrelated to the topographical

context, expressing instead the psychological and spiritual ascent experienced by a person approaching God's house.

Either way, though it is difficult to understand why the concept of ascent is emphasized to the extent that it constitutes the framework for the rebellious speech by Datan and Aviram. Since they also repeat this verb within the speech itself ("is it not enough that you have BROUGHT US UP..."), the text seems to indicate that the use of this specific verb bears some fundamental significance that motivates their rebellion.

Attention should be paid to the fact that while their refusal to ascend – mentioned at the beginning and at the end – refers to going up to Moshe, who is standing at the Ohel Mo'ed, their mention of "bringing up" in the body of their tirade points to the public ascent from Egypt to Eretz Yisrael.

Nechama Leibowitz z"l discusses the surprising use of the expression "a land flowing with milk and honey." Every other place in the Torah where this expression appears, it characterizes Eretz Yisrael. Thus, in the consciousness of Datan and Aviram's audience, that is the natural association of the image. But to our surprise – and that of their listeners – Datan and Aviram apply this image to Egypt, the "land of abominations, the house of slavery,"[9] from which Moshe had brought them out:

"Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey to kill us in the desert..."

It is reasonable to assume that Datan and Aviram consciously and intentionally use an expression which is bound up, in the public consciousness, with Eretz Yisrael. In this way, they are turning the tables: "It is not to a land flowing with milk and honey that you – Moshe – are leading us, but rather from a land of milk and honey that you have removed us!"

Their speech challenges the very rightness of leaving Egypt, the very idea of leaving a land which, in their deceptive words, is referred to as "flowing with milk and honey." It is sufficient to remember the continuation of the journey that Bnei Yisrael have experienced since leaving Egypt – including standing at Sinai and receiving the Torah – to understand who and what the real subject of the rebellion is.

The declaration, "We shall not come up," should be read in its broader sense: it is not only to Moshe, standing in the Ohel Mo'ed, that they refuse to ascend. Their refusal pertains to the entire venture: the great ascent to Eretz Yisrael, which they hint to in their words, "Is it not enough that you have brought us up from a land flowing with milk and honey." Hence the reiteration and emphasis: "We shall not ascend!" Or, as Yisrael Rosenson recently formulated it:

"Accordingly, the words, 'We shall not ascend' should be interpreted... as encompassing the refusal to ascend to the Land of Canaan; it is as if in refusing to

ascend to Moshe they are hinting at the deeper reason: the forced exodus [ascent] from Egypt." [10]

Thus, Datan and Aviram's use of the verb "a-l-h" assumes a special status; it expresses, in fact, the crux of their rebellion and its gravity.

In light of this, Rashi's explanation takes on a broader meaning. If indeed they are refusing "to ascend" – to Moshe as well as to Eretz Yisrael – then they can expect only "descent" – to Sheol.

A LAND THAT CONSUMES ITS INHABITANTS

Continuing this line of thought, attention should be paid to the connection between Datan and Aviram's rebellion and the rebellion of the nation as a whole following the report by the spies. The Rishonim are divided as to the reason for and timing of Korach's rebellion. Ibn Ezra (Bamidbar 16:1) posits that the rebellion took place after the census of the nation at the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar (prior to the sin of the spies!), and the reason for it was the exchanging of the first-born for Leviim to serve in the Mishkan. Ramban (ibid.) disagrees, maintaining that the rebellion is recorded in its chronological place, and that it arose due to the nation's dissatisfaction following their punishment in the incident of the spies:

"It was decreed uthe entire nation [after the sin of the spies] that they would perish and die in the desert. The spirit of the nation was therefore bitter, and they said to themselves that following Moshe's words would only lead them into trouble. Hence Korach found room to take issue with [Moshe's] actions, and thought that the nation would heed him."

According to Ramban, there is a causal psychological relationship between the sin of the spies and Korach's rebellion. Since it had been decreed that the entire generation would die in the desert, the spirit of the nation was low. At such a time, they were susceptible to accusations aimed at the leadership for the serious state in which the nation found itself.[11]

The connection between the sin of the spies and Korach's rebellion reveals itself superficially in the speech by Datan and Aviram. In their brazen negation of the Exodus from Egypt and the journey towards Eretz Yisrael, they continue the nation's rejection of the good land (that had been expressed previously, in the episode of the spies). In this sense, we may view Datan and Aviram as (the last?) representatives of the view of the spies, according to which the land of Egypt – and perhaps even also the desert – was better than Eretz Yisrael.

In light of the above, it is difficult to ignore the literary connection that exists between the report of the spies and the words of Moshe to Datan and Aviram concerning their future in the desert. We noted above that the image of the land as "devouring" is an unusual one. However, the very same image in fact appears in the previous story – in the description of the land by the spies: "The land in which we passed to explore it IS A LAND THAT DEVOURS ITS INHABITANTS" (13:32).

Thus, while the spies – to whom Datan and Aviram now join themselves – feared Eretz Yisrael devouring its inhabitants, they themselves are devoured by the desert. Since Datan and Aviram refuse to "ascend" to that devouring land, they must "descend" into the bowels of the desert, leaving no trace.

NOTES:

[1] Shemot Rabba 2:5. The midrash also appears in Pesikta de-Rav Kahana 1:2.

[2] This approach finds expression in the Rambam's explanation of the reasons for the mitzvot. In his view (as expressed in Guide 3:26), one should seek reasons for and meaning in general thrust of mitzvot (for example, why offer sacrifices) but not their details (why specifically a sheep or goat is offered as a sin offering).

[3] U. Cassuto, for example, explains: "The bush (rubus discolor) is common in the wilderness... Many attempts have been made to explain the bush in symbolic terms, but it is most doubtful that this represents the intention of the literal text" (Commentary on Sefer Shemot, Jerusalem 5712, p. 18). Further on, I shall explain why I regard this conclusion as problematic.

[4] The above quotations are taken from a long list mentioned in Shemot Rabba, parasha 1-2, and in the Mekhilta on the beginning of Sefer Shemot. Rav M.M. Kasher gathers many such midrashim in his "Torah Sheleima" on Shemot chap. 3, sections 35-65.

[5] A separate discussion should be devoted to this verse, so exegetically and psychologically laden with meaning. I shall mention here only that the literary framework surrounding this verse is based upon the root "lashuv" (to return): "Until you return;" "to dust you shall return." While in the first statement man returns "to the earth," in the second he returns "to dust." While in the first he returns to the earth because "from it you were taken," in the second he returns to dust because he himself is no more than dust.

[6] On the contrary, the Netziv emphasizes that there is a difference between "burial" and the phenomenon that is described here: "This is not like an obvious place of burial, where it is clear that the ground in that place has been dug up. Here, when the earth closed its mouth they were gone, with no sign of where their place had been" (Ha'amek Davar on Bamidbar 16:33).

[7] Abarbanel; end of his commentary on Bamidbar chapter 16.

[8] Y.T. Moskowitz, for example, adopts this line in his commentary, in Da'at Mikra p. 196.

[9] N. Leibowitz, New Insights into Sefer Bamidbar, Jerusalem 5756, p. 224.

[10] Y. Rosenson, Devarim ba-Midbar, Jerusalem 5764, p. 204.

[11] In fact, even if we adopt the explanation of Ibn Ezra, we need to understand why the Torah describes the rebellion only now. Perhaps in his view, too, the Torah is hinting at a fundamental connection between the rebellion and the sin of the spies.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish)

This shiur is provided courtesy of the *Virtual Beit Midrash*, the premier source of online courses on Torah and Judaism - 14 different courses on all levels, for all backgrounds.

Make Jewish learning part of your week on a regular basis - enroll in the
Virtual Beit Midrash

(c) Yeshivat Har Etzion 2002 All rights reserved to Yeshivat Har Etzion

Yeshivat Har Etzion
Alon Shvut, Israel, 90433
office@etzion.org.il