

Run for Your Life

By Rabbi Joshua (inadvertently known as The Hoffer) Hoffman

As this week's Torah reading begins, we find Moshe pleading with God to allow him into the Holy Land. God, however, rejects his request. He then tells Moshe to ascend and view the land, and to appoint Yehoshua as his successor, who will bring the people into the land and help them inherit it. After this is recorded, the Torah then records an oration he gave the people at that time, which included a number of warnings not to worship idols in the land they will be entering. This oration ends with the verse, "And you shall observe His statutes and His commandments that I command you this day, so that He will do good to you and to your children after you, and so that you will prolong your days on the land that the Lord your God gives you for all the days" (Devarim 4:40).

After the end of Moshe's oration, the Torah then tells us that he separated three cities on the eastern side of the Jordan, to serve as refuge places for people who killed inadvertently. What is the connection between Moshe's designation of these cities and what preceded it? Rabbi Yitzchak Arieli, in his work Midrash Ariel, writes that Moshe's designation of these cities is directly related to the end of his oration. Moshe had just finished telling the people that they will prolong their days in the land by following God's commandments. The idea behind this, explains Rabbi Arieli, is that if we do mitzvos, God will grant us long life so that we will be able to do more mitzvos. He explains that this is what the rabbis meant when they said that the reward for a mitzvah is a mitzvah - i.e., the opportunity to another mitzvah. This is, in fact, the way that Maimonides explains that rabbinic dictum. Immediately following this formula of how to prolong life, then, the Torah tells us that Moshe designated cities of refuge that will protect the life of the inadvertent killer. While this explanation appears reasonable, I would like to demonstrate that it is also connected to the account of Moshe's pleas, and God's response to it, that preceded the oration.

Why was Moshe denied entry into the land? In parshas Chukas, after Moshe hit the rock in response to the people's request for water, God told Moshe that because he had failed to sanctify His name in the eyes of the people, he would not enter the land. Still, in the beginning of our parsha, the Torah tells us that he prayed for permission to enter. Rashi explains that Moshe, seeing that he had conquered the land of Sichon and Og, which was then granted to the tribes of Reuven and Gad as their inheritance, he thought that the divine decree may have been lifted. God, however, did not permit him to enter any further. Was this denial still due to the incident at the rock, or was there some other reason? According to one midrash, there was, indeed, an entirely different reason - Moshe's killing of the Egyptian who was beating an Israelite slave in the days that Moshe was still living in Pharaoh's house. This midrash needs to be understood. After all, Moshe's motivation in killing the Egyptian was to save the life of the slave. Why, then, was he punished for it?

Another midrash, cited by the commentary Da'as Zikeinim to parshas Emor, relates that the man who cursed God, as recorded in that parsha, was actually the son of that Egyptian taskmaster, born from the illicit relationship he had with the wife of the Hebrew slave, whom Moshe later struck down. When the son discovered that Moshe had killed his father through use of the divine name, he cursed the name of God. As we explained in netvort to parshas Emor, Moshe was denied entry to the land, according to the midrash, because his killing of the Egyptian led, ultimately, to a desecration of God's name on the part of the Egyptian. Although his connection to this desecration of God's name was inadvertent, on his level it was something that should not have happened, and, so, he was punished for it.

The rabbis tell us that the cities of refuge on the eastern side of the Jordan, although designated as such by Moshe, did not serve their function until after the nation crossed the Jordan and separated the other three cities of refuge. Still, Moshe designated the three cities in the eastern side before his death. The Talmud, as cited by Rashi, says that Moshe wanted to perform as much of the mitzvah as he was able to, in his lifetime. Maimonides, in his commentary to the mishnah, refers to this act of designation as a partial mitzvah, and praises Moshe for his desire to perform whatever part of a mitzvah he was able to. In light of the midrash, however, I believe we can see another dimension to Moshe's designation of these cities. It was his deep love for his people that led Moshe to kill the Egyptian who was beating the slave. As Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik has pointed out, Moshe, as a prince in Pharaoh's house, must have been devising plans through which he could alleviate the suffering of his people in general. Still, when he saw one member of his nation in danger of his life, he cast all his plans aside and did all he could to save that one life. Ultimately, it was due to this act that Moshe was denied entry to the land.

After informing the people of the verdict he received, Moshe proceeded to tell them how they could prolong their own lives in the land. Upon completing his oration, he then designated the three cities of refuge on the eastern side of the Jordan, in an effort to do what he could to set in motion the mechanism that would help save the life of an inadvertent killer from the blood avenger. His concern for the life of every single member of his nation, as exemplified by his killing of the Egyptian taskmaster, an act that was the ultimate cause for God's denying him entry into the land, motivated him to safeguard the inadvertent killer, as well. He thus remained the ro'eh ne'eman, the faithful shepherd of his people, from the day he first encountered them until his farewell orations.

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