

The Purpose of the Wilderness Revelation of Torah

In this weeks reading from Parsahat Chukat (*Bamidbar / Numbers 19:1-22:1*) the Lord speaks to Moshe about the “*red heifer*” regarding ritual purity. The High Priest Eleazar took the heifer outside of the camp, slaughter the animal, and sprinkle the blood towards the front of the Ohel Moed (אהל-מועד, *Tent of Meeting*) seven times. The entire heifer is burned to ashes, its hide, flesh, blood, and refuse, everything (*19:5*). Cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet material are cast into the midst of the burning heifer. The Priest then washes himself and his cloths; he is unclean until evening and may then enter the camp. The ashes of the heifer are mixed with water and used for the removal of impurity; the water-ash mixture is used for the purification from physical uncleanness (*19:8-9*). The mitzvot on touching the dead is also given; if a man touches the dead he will become unclean. If he finds himself in the room with a dead person, he is unclean; if a man touches a dead man who was slain in the field he is unclean. In fact, if a person who has become unclean by a dead body touches anyone else, the person he touches becomes unclean too (*19:22*). These Scriptures show how uncleanness behaves as a transmittable communicable defilement. It is interesting here that the only thing that can overcome becoming unclean by death is death itself, the ashes of the red heifer. Might this suggest a future messianic expectation of the work of the Messiah?

The people arrived in the desert in the wilderness of Zin at a place called Kadesh. There was no water and so the people complained. Moshe brings this matter before the Lord and the Lord instructs him to take the staff and “*speak to the rock.*” Moshe and Aaron take the staff and speak harshly to the people and strike the rock two times disobeying God’s word. The Torah portion ends with a description of Israel defeating the kings of Arad and Sihon (*21:1*). After defeating the kings, the people complain because of the long journey and the Lord sends fiery serpents among them and many people died (*21:6*). Moshe set up a bronze serpent upon a staff so that everyone who looked upon the serpent would not die if they had been bitten by the serpent.

ספר במדבר פרק יט *Bamidbar / Numbers 19:1-3*

א וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן
לֵאמֹר: ב זֹאת חֻקַּת הַתּוֹרָה אֲשֶׁר-
צִוָּה יְהוָה לֵאמֹר דַּבֵּר | אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל
וַיִּקְחוּ אֵלַיְךָ פָּרָה אֲדָמָה תְּמִימָה
אֲשֶׁר אֵין-בָּהּ מוּם אֲשֶׁר לֹא-עָלָה
עָלֶיהָ עֵל: ג וַנִּתְּתָם אֵת-אֶל-אֶלְעָזָר
הַכֹּהֵן וְהוֹצִיא אֵת-אֶל-מַחוּץ לַמַּחֲנֶה
וְשָחַט אֵת-לִפְנָיו:

19:1 Then the Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, 19:2 ‘This is the statute of the law which the Lord has commanded, saying, ‘Speak to the sons of Israel that they bring you an unblemished red heifer in which is no defect and on which a yoke has never been placed. 19:3 ‘You shall give it to Eleazar the priest, and it shall be brought outside the camp and be slaughtered in his presence. (NASB)

In this week’s reading we learn about the ashes of the red heifer and the statute on the waters of purification, were the ashes of the red heifer makes one ritually clean. According to the Scriptures, defilement was contracted by either touching a dead body,

entering into a house in which a corpse was lying, touching a bone or a tomb, touching a woman who was menstruating, or to touch someone or something that had tsaraat. The danger was having contracted ritual defilement one might enter the Tabernacle and incur the penalty of death and be cut off from Israel (*Bamidbar / Numbers 19:13*). The waters of purification are used to bring one back into a state of ritual purity. Note also that one who performs the sprinkling of purification, he is unclean until evening and the person being sprinkled doesn't become clean until evening. (*Bamidbar / Numbers 19:12-22*) Following this event, the person who was unclean and becomes clean is able to enter the presence of God at the Tabernacle. Based upon the Torah, when one contracted ritual impurity, one needed to go outside of the camp into arid places until a specified amount of time, he is made clean, and then he or she may return back into the community. The idea of going and returning from arid places had led some to ask why the Lord God chose to communicate His Torah of an eternal covenant with the Children of Israel in the arid and desolate desert? The reading this week from *Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashat 19, Part 26* (מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה יט סימן כו) provides some insight into the reasons why the Lord chose to reveal His Torah in the wilderness (the arid and desolate place).

Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashat 19, Part 26

Then sang Israel (Bamidbar / Numbers 21:17). Why is Moshe not mentioned in this context? Because he owed his punishment to water, and no man praises his executioner. Why is not the name of the Holy One blessed be He, mentioned? This may be illustrated by the case of the governor who made a feast for the king. The king asked, will my friend be there? No, he was told. Said he, then I also am not going there. In the same way the Holy One blessed be He, said, Since Moshe is not mentioned there, I also will not be mentioned there. The well, which the princes digged, which the nobles of the people delved (Bamidbar / Numbers 21:18). But was there any digging in this connection? No, but it means that the well was given to them by reason of the merit of the patriarchs who are called princes; as may be inferred from the text, He opened the rock, and waters gushed out, for He remembered His holy word unto Abraham His servant (Tehillim / Psalms 105:41). Which of the nobles of the people delved, with the scepter, and with their staves. This implies that the princes stood by the well and drew water with their staves, each one to his own tribe and to his own family. The space between the standards was filled with water flowing with sustained vigor. If a woman had to go to her friend who belonged to another standard she would go in a ship; as it says, They went to ziyyoth on the river, and ziyyoth cannot but denote ships; as is proved by the text, Neither shall gallant ship (zi) pass thereby (Isaiah 33:21). The water flowed on outside of the camp and encircled a large tract of land; as it says, He guides me in straight paths (circles) for His name's sake (Tehillim / Psalms 23:3). It caused numerous varieties of grass and trees to spring forth, as it says, He makes me to lie down in green

pastures; He leads me beside still waters. During the whole period that they were in the wilderness they continued to use the well in this way. Consequently, they sang in their praise, Spring up oh well, which the princes digged. And from the wilderness a Mattanah (21:18). This implies that it was given (nittenah) to them in the wilderness to serve their needs. Another exposition, Why was it given in the wilderness? Because if it had been given to them in the promised land, the tribe in whose territory it was given would have said, I have a prior claim to it. Consequently, it was given to the wilderness, so that all should have an equal claim to it. And another reason why it was given in the wilderness is this, As the wilderness is neither sown nor tilled, so if one accepts the yoke of the Torah he is relieved of the yoke of earning a living; and as the wilderness does not yield any taxes from crops, so scholars are free men in this world. Another reason why it was given in the wilderness, Who preserves the Torah? He who makes himself like a wilderness and segregates himself from every one. And from Mattanah to Nahaliel; and from Nahaliel to Bamoth (21:19). Three places; corresponding to the three courts of law in Jerusalem, which explained the Torah to Israel. From Mattanah to Nahaliel alludes to the Sanhedrin on the Temple Mount. From Nahaliel to Bamoth alludes to the Sanhedrin in the Temple Court beside the altar. And from Bamoth to the Valley that is in the field of Moab alludes to the Sanhedrin in the Chamber of Hewn Stones which was in the territory of Ruth who came from the land of Moab; as it says, It is a Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the field of Moab (Ruth 2:6). Which can be seen in the desert (21:20). This alludes to the well, which accompanied them until it entered the sea of Tiberias (Kinnereth or Gennesaret in Galilee). One who stands in the desert observes inside the sea, as it were, a cavity the size of an oven. That is the well which can be seen in the desert.

In *Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashat 19, Part 26*, we read about the well that was dug in the wilderness and the water that gushed from the rock at the command of Moshe. The rabbis say that the water from the well flowed and the Lord caused it to encircle the camp. The water caused numerous varieties of grass and trees to spring forth and the people sung because of their joy. This might be a picture of God planting His people in the midst of a garden (e.g. בגן-עדן). The midrash concludes saying that the reason the water was given in the wilderness was because nobody laid claim to the land in the wilderness. The wilderness belonged to nobody and therefore nobody could claim they had a special right to the Lord. The purpose of the wilderness revelation of Torah was so that every man could hold an equal claim. The rabbis say that noone sows or plants in the wilderness, therefore, the Torah was given so that the one who accepts the yoke of the Torah is relieved of the yoke of earning a living since there are no crops, and there are no taxes that may be exacted upon the people. Based upon this concept, can we say

that another reason the Torah was revealed in the wilderness was to indicate that man does not earn a wage towards salvation by observing Torah? In addition to this, they say that the one who preserves the Torah is the one who makes himself a wilderness, making himself an arid place. In other words, a man segregates himself from everyone else like one does going into arid places. Another way of looking at this may be by separating ourselves from the world, not living as the world lives (e.g. *we are to be holy, righteous, innocent before God, etc*). This segregation or segregation from others is illustrated again in a different way in *Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashat 19, Part 27* (מדרש רבה במדבר פרשה יט סימן כז).

Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashat 19, Part 27

And Israel sent messengers (21:21). This bears on what Scripture says, Trust in the Lord and do good; dwell in the land, and cherish faithfulness (Tehillim / Psalms 37:2). It also says, Depart from evil and do good; seek peace, pursue it (34:15). Now the Torah did not insist that we should actually go in pursuit of the commandments, but said, If a bird's nest chance to be before you (Devarim / Deuteronomy 22:6); If you meet you enemy's ox (Shemot / Exodus 23:4); if you see the ass of him that hates you (Shemot / Exodus 23:5); when you beat you olive tree (Devarim / Deuteronomy 24:20); when you gather the grapes of your vineyard (Devarim / Deuteronomy 24:21); when you come into your neighbors vineyard (Devarim / Deuteronomy 24:25);. In all these cases, if they come your way you are commanded to perform the duties connected with them, but you need not go in pursuit of them. In the case of peace, however, seek peace wherever you happen to be, and pursue it, if it is elsewhere. Israel in fact acted in this way. Although the Holy One blessed be He, had said to them, begin to possess it, and contend with him in battle (2:4), they pursued peace, and Israel sent messengers unto Sihon, Let me pass through your land (Bamidbar / Numbers 21:21).

The midrash states that we are not actually commanded to pursue the commandments, but that “*when it happens*” we are to do according to the commandment providing the example of the mitzvah on the bird’s nest. On the other hand, we are to pursue peace. That is an interesting perspective; why do you think the rabbis say we are not to pursue the commandments? The midrash begins and ends saying to depart from evil, do good, seek peace and pursue it and in the middle states we are not to pursue the command. We are told to intentionally do good, to intentionally depart from evil, and to intentionally pursue peace but do not pursue the commandments. It seems the intent of the midrash is to suggest an aspect of the life of one who pursues God in the sense that these things will characterize who we are, they will flow from the inside out because we are His people and we have His Holy Spirit dwelling within us.

Thus far we have been discussing the ashes of the red heifer, uncleanness and the wilderness, the giving of the Torah in the wilderness, and pursuing the mitzvot (com-

mandments) based upon the comments from the rabbis in Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar. According to Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, the giving of the Torah in the wilderness was to signify that the Torah belongs to everyone and not to a particular person, community, or people. The giving of the Torah in the wilderness also represents the idea that Torah is not a product of a particular culture and genre. How do these concepts relate to Yeshua the Messiah and faith in Him by all peoples? The Torah of God enriches all cultures, all peoples, and functions to confront and refine the “*barren wilderness*” within each person. Note also that the wilderness is considered a place for uncleanness. Note also that according to the Jewish Encyclopedia the yoke of the God’s Kingdom is synonymous to the “*yoke of the Torah*” and that the yoke of the Torah grants freedom from all other yokes. Judaism’s understanding of the Torah is as a good thing and not something bad. The Apostles also believed the same, that the Torah is good and not bad (*Romans 3:31, 7:12*). The Torah sets us free from bondage, it does not put us into bondage. These discussions on the Torah being given in the wilderness, and the conclusion that one person or community may not lay claim to the Torah is a perspective that appears to be consistent with the Abrahamic covenant.

The Lord God’s call on Abraham’s life in Parashat Lech Lecha (*Bereshit / Genesis 12:1-17:27*) was to go from his land from his father’s house, and from his people to a land that He will show him. The Lord promises to bless Abraham and make him into a great nation and that those who bless him the Lord will bless, and those who curse him the Lord will curse. We find in God’s call on Abraham that in him all the families of the earth will be blessed. In the Hebrew text, the word “*ha’adamah*” (הָאָדָמָה, ground or earth) is used to indicate that all of the families of the Earth will be blessed, and not just those who are in the land of Israel. The Scriptures say “*all of the families of the ground*” taking from the meaning that God created man from the dust of the earth in *Bereshit / Genesis 2:7*. The Targum Onkelos (Aramaic translation) says all the “*seed of the earth*” will be blessed or the “*seed of the ground;*” it is in this way all the peoples of the earth are referred to. In this covenant that God is making with Abraham, the Lord makes a promise personally with Abraham, to his descendants (Israel), and to all the world (non-Jewish peoples). Based upon the covenant the Lord made with Abraham and his descendants, is it surprising that the midrash interprets the revelation of the Torah in the wilderness was for every man (Jew or non-Jew) and so every man could hold an equal claim? Is that a reasonable assessment?

When the Apostle Paul was speaking to Timothy, in *1 Timothy 2:1-6*, was he thinking about these things, the wilderness, the giving of the Torah, and the Abrahamic covenant when he said the Lord “*desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth?*” Paul says something similar to the Romans in *Romans 10:5-14*.

Romans 10:5-14

10:5 For Moses writes that the man who practices the righteousness which is based on law shall live by that righteousness. 10:6 But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: ‘Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down), 10:7 or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up

from the dead).’ 10:8 But what does it say? ‘The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart’ that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, 10:9 that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; 10:10 for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation. 10:11 For the Scripture says, ‘Whoever believes in Him will not be disappointed.’ 10:12 For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call on Him; 10:13 for ‘Whoever will call on the name of the Lord will be saved.’ 10:14 How then will they call on Him in whom they have not believed? How will they believe in Him whom they have not heard? And how will they hear without a preacher? (NASB)

Paul speaks of there being no difference between Jew and Greek. Both have equal claim to faith in the Messiah and the accompanying blessing that results in the covenant relationship with the Lord. Could the rabbinic understanding of the revelation of Torah in the wilderness so that no man may lay a claim to the covenant have led Paul to say “*whoever believes...*” and “*whoever will call upon the name of the Lord?*” The way this is worded, and based upon the midrash on the Torah portion, this very well may be the case.

It is important to remember that the Bible does not support replacement theology. In all of Scripture, Israel and the Jewish people are central. The Scriptures describe the unique relationship the Lord has with ethnic Israel and the Torah also describes how the Lord extends a relationship to those who are not Jewish. The prophets envisioned that myriads of Gentiles would come to the knowledge of the Messiah, to the submission to his rule, and connect to the people of Israel. The prophet Isaiah (*Isaiah 2:2*) prophesied that people from all nations (the Gentiles) would flow to the mountain of the Lord (in Jerusalem) and worship there. Later in *Isaiah 11:10–12*, the Messiah is said to inspire the Gentiles to come to Him as well as to regather the scattered Jewish people. Note also that *Isaiah 49:6*, *Micah 4:2*, and *Zechariah 8:22–23* contain similar prophecies. The point is, based upon the present study, God’s purpose of covenant relationship (salvation) extends to all. The Lord’s desire that “*all men*” should be saved, suggests for us that He seeks to be at peace with all peoples, just like the exhortation for us to pursue peace according to the Midrash. The Lord is pursuing peace with men in the Messiah Yeshua. The Apostle Peter said, in *2 Peter 3:9*, that God’s will is that none would perish but that all would come to repentance. The love of God is so great that His intention was for all men to come to Him as indicated by the instructions, commands, and promises we find throughout the Scriptures. Thus, the one who comes to Yeshua the Messiah based upon the terms laid out in the Scriptures will in no wise be cast off, all who come and call upon the name of Yeshua, seeking our Father in heaven, will be saved! The purpose of the wilderness revelation of Torah was to indicate the manner in which the Lord would save His people. That Salvation is in His Messiah Yeshua! Praise God!