



## MIDEI CHODESH B'CHODSHO

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# My, How Time Flies....

You may well have missed it, but an astounding phenomenon took place in the Torah a few weeks ago...

*Nearly thirty-eight years passed without comment from the text.*

In one fell swoop, the Torah jumps from the Rebellion of Korach to the death of Miriam, close to forty years later. Sandwiched between these two events, the Israelites' period of wilderness wandering completely disappears from the text. From this point on, the Torah deals solely with the nation's final year in the wilderness and with the messages and commandments transmitted by Moshe during that year.

Why is the Torah silent concerning the bulk of the forty-year period of wilderness wandering? It would seem that these were important, formative years. An entire generation, the

Generation of the Exodus has perished, and a new generation has risen, destined to enter the land.

Why, then, do all the wilderness years pass without any comment at all; without, in fact, even a note in the text that they have passed?

Strangely enough, the Torah's silence concerning the missing thirty-eight years is matched by a similar silence from the classical commentaries. While some scholars clearly note the phenomenon of the missing years; they make no attempt to explain why the Torah does not chronicle this period of time more fully.

Perhaps the key to this mystery lies in the answer to another, more technical question...

What is the symbolism of the repeated appearance of the *number forty* at critical junctures in the biblical text? Why are there: forty years of rain that create the flood; forty days repeatedly spent by Moshe on Mount Sinai's summit over the course of Revelation; forty days during which the spies tour the Land of Canaan; forty years of wandering in the wilderness...?

A possible answer to this second question emerges from an unexpected source...

In commenting on the development of a human fetus, the Talmud states that, until the passage of forty days from conception, the embryo is considered to be *maya b'alma*, "mere water". From that point on, the fetus enters a new, more advanced stage of development. Clearly, to the rabbinic mind, *the fortieth day marks a critical point in the*

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gestation process.<sup>1</sup>

If the number forty represents a critical juncture in the biological gestation of a human being; perhaps the number forty plays a similar role throughout Jewish tradition.

Upon consideration, *each time a phenomenon appears in units of forty in the Torah text, a new reality is about to be born.* The forty days of rain in Noach's time, mark not only the destruction of the old world but *the birth of a new one*; Moshe's forty days on the summit of Mount Sinai signal *the birth of a new nation* forged on the foundation of God's law; the forty day tour of the spies through Canaan gives rise to *the birth of a new, devastating reality* for the generation of the Exodus; and the forty years of wilderness wandering give *birth to a new generation of Israelites* who will enter the land.

The forty-year period of wilderness wandering, therefore, carries no intrinsic, independent significance. Instead, these years emerge as a period of incubation, a time when, step by step, a new generation is forged through a crucible of experience. The value of the wilderness years will therefore ultimately be determined by the nature of the generation born; by the product created during the passing years.

Will this new generation of Israelites avoid the missteps of their fathers? Will these people; surrounding by clouds of God's protection, sustained on the heaven-sent Manna,

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1. Note: A word of caution: This rabbinic statement concerning the developmental stages of the human fetus should not be misinterpreted as an automatic acceptance of abortion during the early, forty day period, of gestation. While the laws of abortion in Jewish law are complex and detailed, the general rule remains that abortion is prohibited at any time after conception unless the life of the mother is threatened. Under all circumstances, appropriate rabbinic authority should be consulted.

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guided on their journeys by God's manifest will; effectively transition from the 'fear of' to the 'love of' God? Will the forty years have done their job?

These questions can only be answered in retrospect, as the story of this generation unfolds, *after* the wilderness years have passed. The Torah therefore remains silent concerning the passage of the years themselves, allowing us to draw our conclusions concerning their value after the fact, on the basis of the actions of the generation born.

Turning to our day, we find ourselves in the midst of dramatic, historic events; "giving birth" to new realities that will affect the entire globe. And once again, as it has throughout history, the small land of Israel stands at the crossroads of destiny, at the spear-point of earth-shattering change.

Clearly the questions abound...

Where will the tectonic shifts around

us ultimately lead? Will this painful, yet hopeful, period finally give birth to a “New Middle East?” Will our struggles result in the permanent weakening of our enemies and in the emergence and strengthening of alliances? And, given the unleashing of public antisemitism across the globe, how will we move forward in the community of nations?

But there is another set of questions that is equally, if not more, important...

*Who will we be when the dust settles?*

What lessons will we learn from this period of great potential, deep pain, and burgeoning hope? Will the unity forged on the battlefield carry over to our struggles in times of peace? Will a recognition of the vulnerability caused by our divisions compel us to transcend the fault lines within our society? Will the painful cost of war convince us to never again take

the preciousness of life for granted? Will our ongoing struggles and successes strengthen the bonds between diaspora Jewish communities and the State of Israel? Above all, will the miraculous confluence of events of these past months result in a deeper appreciation of God’s presence in our lives and of His guiding hand in our nation’s history?

Long ago, our nation’s years of wilderness wandering “gave birth” to a new generation, facing new challenges, in a changing world. These past months have seen our world immeasurably transformed. With God’s help, we will be transformed as well, as we confront the new challenges and opportunities that lie ahead. ■

**Rabbi Goldin** is the author of the OU Press volumes "Unlocking the Torah Text," and "Unlocking the Haggada."



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