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Flowers in the Desert: A Camp in Crisis

The desert encampment was rattled by strife and discord. We were still reeling from the disaster of the meraglim and the harsh forty-year death sentence that followed. An angry insurrection erupted, led by Korach, joined by 250 influential figures and by Moshe Rabbeinu's longtime adversaries, Datan and Aviram.

A heavenly fire descended and consumed the ringleaders of the rebellion, while Korach and his entourage were swallowed alive by a roaring earthquake that split the earth beneath them.

The social fabric of the camp was in shambles. Moshe's authority had now been challenged four times, and with each challenge his leadership seemed to erode. Additionally, the *kehunah* itself had been thrown into question as Korach persuaded many that the Kohanim possessed no special claim to serve in the Mikdash.

At this point, the dream of entering Eretz Yisrael seemed all but lost. With so much strife and division, it was hard to imagine our nation enduring the next thirty-eight torturous years in the desert, let alone emerging strong enough to enter the Land.

At this point, Hashem made a public display to reinforce His selection of Aharon and to reaffirm the authoritative hierarchy He had

established. It had to be public, and it had to be decisive. All challenges to Hashem's choice had to be silenced once and for all.

Each tribal leader submitted his staff, and the staffs were placed in the Mishkan. Only one staff, that of Aharon, blossomed and produced fruit. This supernatural miracle demonstrated beyond doubt that Hashem had chosen Aharon to serve as Kohen. The miracle was meant to quiet the anger and suspicion that had engulfed the camp and allow the people to resume the long journey that still lay ahead.

A G-D OF PLAGUES

Why a staff? And why a staff that flowers and produces fruit? There were many other ways to verify Aharon's selection. Hashem could have chosen any number of dramatic signs to establish his selection of Aharon. Evidently, this colorful process conveyed a message that extended beyond Aharon's appointment. By selecting a staff and transforming a dry stick into blossoms and fruit, Hashem was teaching us something broader about Himself and about the relationship He seeks with us.

The lesson was especially important because we were still in the early stages of discovering who Hashem is. As Chazal stressed, many, if not most, of the theological traditions established by the Avot in Sefer Bereishit had

faded over time. In Egypt, we sank into a thoroughly pagan culture. We had to be reeducated about the One G-d whom Avraham had discovered. Moshe sensed this challenge at the burning bush when he asked Hashem how he should describe Him to a nation of slaves that had lost its monotheistic heritage. Nearly a year and a half after leaving Egypt, we were still in the process of learning who Hashem is and how He operates within our world.

Our first encounters with Hashem in Mitzrayim were with a G-d who brought the Egyptians to their knees through a year-long series of plagues and punishments. This campaign culminated in the death of every firstborn, leaving a trail of death and devastation across Egypt.

A week later, at Yam Suf, we encountered Hashem as a warrior, battling Egypt's elite forces, sinking their chariots, and throwing their horsemen into chaos. Once again, we witnessed Hashem through the prism of punishment and judgment.

These experiences could easily have left us with a lopsided view of HaKadosh Baruch Hu. The dominant way Hashem wishes to relate to His world is through rachamim and chesed rather than through punishment and vengeance. He far prefers that the wicked repent and return than that they be crushed by punishment. Only when evil persists and threatens His world does Hashem intervene forcefully. Even then, His preference is always for teshuvah rather than coercion. Yet our first two encounters with Hashem created the impression of a G-d who is angry, vengeful, and quick to punish.

Some time had passed since the ten plagues and the battle at Yam Suf. In the interim, we had received the manna from heaven and stood at Har Sinai to receive the Torah. We

had built a Mishkan to house Hashem's daily presence and had experienced His compassion firsthand when He forgave us for the terrible sin of the *Eigel HaZahav*. Yet as events began to unravel during the second year of our journey, we once again encountered Hashem through the lens of judgment.

A G-D OF DEATH

After witnessing the plague that followed Korach's rebellion, on the heels of the earthquake that swallowed the rebels alive, the nation approached Moshe with a haunting accusation:

«אַתֶּם הִמַּתְתֶּם אֶת עַם ה'»

“You have killed the people of Hashem.” Behind the accusation lay a deeper fear. Was our relationship with Hashem now to be defined by death and punishment?

This question was especially painful for the older generation. Having been sentenced to perish in the desert, they faced the prospect of wandering for decades with certain death awaiting them at the end of the journey. For them, every new punishment seemed to confirm a grim reality: that Hashem's presence had become associated with judgment rather than hope.

AVRAHAM'S DISCOVERY

This misunderstanding was not unique to the generation of the desert. In many ways, it was the same mistake that had haunted

humanity for nearly two thousand years. Humanity had heard of the expulsion from Eden and of Kayin's punishment for murder. It witnessed the collapse of the Tower of Babel and lived in the shadow of the great flood that had erased an entire civilization. From heaven it seemed to encounter only punishment and retribution.

Avraham's great discovery was not merely that there is one G-d. He discovered that the One G-d who created the universe is also moral, compassionate, and deeply invested in human welfare. Avraham sensed a moral spirit coursing through creation. He saw a world delicately calibrated to sustain life and human flourishing. He recognized not merely a Creator, but a moral Creator, and he sought to become an agent of that moral vision. His revolution was the realization that Hashem is compassionate and merciful, that He desires human growth rather than human suffering.

That legacy now stood in danger. This painful chapter of failures, rebellions, and punishments threatened to obscure the image of Hashem that Avraham had introduced to the world. Avraham's descendants, entrusted with carrying that vision to humanity, had sunk into despair. Surrounded by decrees, plagues, and death, they began to see Hashem through the lens of punishment rather than compassion.

SIGNS OF LIFE

The flowering staff restored the image that Avraham had first discovered. It is precisely in this environment that Hashem stages a demonstration that His ultimate will is not to punish humanity but to help it grow. The very same staff that had been associated with the plagues in Egypt and the battle at Yam Suf now became a source of life, producing blossoms and fruit. The flowering of Aharon's

staff proved that the primary purpose of the staff was never to rain punishment upon human beings, but to nurture life and guide it toward growth.

When Moshe was first given his staff, it was introduced as a staff of *otot* rather than a staff of *makkot*. The Torah's emphasis is deliberate. At times, *makkot* would be necessary. Evil must sometimes be confronted and punished. But the staff was never *defined* by punishment. It was an instrument through which Hashem revealed Himself to His people. Sometimes it brought plagues; at other moments it brought redemption, sustenance, and hope. The same staff that struck the Nile also brought forth water from a rock.

This time it was not Moshe's staff but Aharon's. Yet the message was identical. The staffs entrusted to Moshe and Aharon were instruments of life, not death. Their deepest purpose was not to destroy what is broken but to cultivate what can still blossom.

The flowering staff was more than proof of Aharon's appointment. It reminded a frightened generation that even in a desert filled with graves, Hashem was still teaching us about life.

A plague can halt evil, but only a flower can symbolize life. ■



Rabbi Moshe Taragin's latest sefer entitled: **Reclaiming Redemption, Vol. II: Faith, Identity, Peoplehood, and the Storms of War**, is available at: mtaraginbooks.com.

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