בס״ד

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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1 AV | PARSHAS MATTOS-MASEI

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Moshe ben Avraham Morris Chausky. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

ישיבה וכולל בית משה חיים
TALMUDIC UNIVERSITY

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Kiss of Death

Aharon Hakohen ascended Hor Mountain on Hashem's command and he died there (33:38).

The second *parsha* of this week's double portion recounts all of Bnei Yisroel's journeys and encampments in the desert. One of the only incidents that the Torah recollects in this comprehensive recapping of each of the stops during the forty years of wandering is the death of Aharon HaKohen and the resulting attack by the Canaanite king of Arad.

Rashi comments on the phrase *"on Hashem's command"* (literally, "by the mouth of Hashem"), "this teaches us that he died through a kiss (ibid)."

However, Rashi's interpretation of the verse does not seem to be supported by the order of the words. A simple reading of the verse seems to clearly indicate that Aharon ascended the mountain *"by the mouth of Hashem"* not that his death was *"by the mouth of Hashem."*

Many commentators struggle to explain this difficult Rashi. Some say that the words *"by the mouth of Hashem"* applies to both the preceding phrase and the one following it (Sifsei Chachamim). However, this creates an almost untenable and awkward construct of the *possuk*.

Others (such as Maskil L'Dovid) say the words *"by the mouth of Hashem"* are actually superfluous because it is clear from the first time the Torah describes Aharon's death (20:27) that Aharon ascended at Hashem's command.

Therefore, the repetition in this week's *parsha* is to teach us that he died through a kiss. Nevertheless, this explanation doesn't sufficiently address the reverse order of the phrases in the *possuk* either.

In order to fully understand this episode we must first delve into the concept of what it means to die through a kiss. In general, when a human being dies the Angel of Death is sent to take his life. However, in the case of death through a kiss there is no need for the angel to be sent; for this form of death is "merely" a reversal of the process of creation.

The process of creation, that is, the actual beginning of creation begins in the spiritual world known as *atzilus* – "nearness." In Platonic terms, this means that a perfect model of our world exists in the spiritual realm and this world becomes increasingly physical as it progresses through the stages of *briah* and *yetzira* until it finally descends to the realm of *asiyah* – the physical domain in which we find ourselves. This process is known as *hishtalshelus*, which, in simple terms, describes the manner in which the spiritual becomes increasingly physical in creation.

This concept of death through a kiss is, in fact, not an actual physical death at all. A kiss is a phenomenon that describes the connection of two separate entities, and in this case, it refers to the reconnecting to the spiritual roots of one's existence. This is accomplished not through death but rather through a step by step reversal of creation.

This understanding of the process of death is closely related to Rambam's understanding of the end of time. There is a well-known disagreement between Rambam and Ramban regarding what happens after the "resurrection of the dead" in terms of the final stage of humanity. Maimonides is of the opinion that the physical existence of mankind is finite and that eventually everything will revert to a spiritual state (*Hilchos Teshuvah* 8:2). (Ramban in the *Shar Hagemul* argues that the soul will abolish the power of the body and that the body will then be unified with the soul for eternity.)

The cantillation of the verse seems to bear out Rashi's reading of the *possuk* as well. The actual process of death described in this *possuk* begins with Aharon "ascending" at Hor Mountain. The Torah is telling us that Aharon's ascension was actually "by the mouth of Hashem." The Torah uses the verb "*vayal*," which is the same root word that we use for when a person dies (i.e. *aliyah*).

Sense and Sensitivity

You must designate for yourselves cities of refuge (35:11).

Moshe is instructed by Hashem to designate six cities of refuge. These cities served to shelter individuals who committed manslaughter in an accidental manner. These six cities were located in the lands given to the twelve tribes. In fact, these were Levitical cities; Maimonides (*Yad Hilchos Rotzeach* 8:9) rules that all of the Levitical cities were designated in such a manner bringing the total to 48 cities as is stated earlier in the *parsha* (35:6).

Three of these cities were located in Eretz Yisroel proper and three were located on the eastern border of the Jordan. The Gemara (*Makkos* 10a) questions the seeming incongruity of these designations – nine and a half of the tribes lived west of the Jordan and only two and a half tribes lived east of the Jordan; so why were the two sides of the Jordan allotted an equal number of refuge cities? The Gemara answers that there were many more murderers living east of the Jordan. Thus, even though the population disparity was more than 3-1, an equal number of cities were required east of the Jordan.

Tosfos (ad loc) finds this explanation quite problematic. Since these cities were only a refuge for those who committed murder accidentally, what difference does it make that there were more murderers living east of the Jordan; those cities weren't meant as a sanctuary for them anyway! The fact that there are more murderers there should not add to the amount of cities of refuge, so why isn't it determined based on population size?

Maimonides (*Yad Hilchos Rotzeach* 6:1) differentiates between the various types of inadvertent manslaughter: 1) A person throws a rock into a public thoroughfare and it strikes and kills someone. This is considered negligent manslaughter. Even though there was no intent to kill, the person throwing the rock should have expected it to be a likely outcome and it is not considered accidental. Therefore, the perpetrator does not go to a city of refuge. 2) A person throws a rock into a clearly empty field and suddenly someone unexpectedly enters and is struck and killed. In this case it is considered accidental, but the person throwing the rock does not go to a city of refuge. 3) A person throws a rock into an area that is generally only occupied at night and he threw it during the day. Unfortunately, someone happened to be in the area and was struck and killed. In this case, it is inadvertent manslaughter and the perpetrator goes to a city of refuge.

We see from here that the only type of murderer who goes to a city of refuge is one with some level of responsibility. Even though there was clearly no intent to kill and no gross negligence, the person still bears some responsibility because he knew that while in general people are only in that area at night, there is a possibility of someone being there during the day and he should have been more careful. He is therefore held liable for his actions.

The Talmud is teaching us a remarkable life lesson here. The reason that the residents east of the Jordan required more cities of refuge is because they had a much higher incidence of murder. In a place where the rate of murder is much higher there is a diminishing sensitivity to the sanctity of life. This will, of course, lead to more inadvertent deaths as well, simply because the populace will not be as careful since they have become desensitized to the absolute tragedy of death. This leads to a carelessness that will cause more inadvertent deaths to occur. This is why they needed an equal number of cities of refuge, even though they were less than 25% of the population.

One of the terrible downsides to living in the "Information Age" is that we are constantly bombarded with the entire spectrum of humanity's most base behaviors. Whether it's horrific mass shootings, heads of state who systematically murder their own citizens, or simply an avalanche of images of celebrities who forgot to get dressed, we have become both inured and desensitized. Thus, in our lives as well, we begin to drop our standards of what we are to expect from ourselves. The only antidote to this downward decline is a repositioning of a moral compass in our lives that will remind us of who we can be and what type of lives we should aspire to lead.

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