

Parshat Ekev
Losing and Finding Our Way
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As Moshe continues his narrative in Parshat Ekev, he intersperses his story with a fleeting description of part of the route taken by Bnei Yisrael as they wandered the desert. He then links this journey to the death of Aaron.

The children of Israel journeyed from the wells of Bnei Yaakan to Moserah. There Aaron died and they buried him there and Elazar his son became the Priest in his stead.

From there they journeyed to Gudgod and from Gudgod to Yatvata, a land of brooks and water. (Devarim 10:6-7)

וּבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל נָסְעוּ מִבְּאֵרֵת בְּנֵי־יַעֲקֹן מוֹסֵרָה שָׁם מָת אֶהֱרֹן וַיִּקְבְּר שָׁם וַיִּכְהֵן אֶלְעָזָר בְּנוֹ תַחֲתָיו:
מִשָּׁם נָסְעוּ הַגִּדְגָדָה וּמִן־הַגִּדְגָדָה יְטַבְתָּה אֶרֶץ נַחֲלֵי מַיִם: (דְּבָרִים י"ז)

This account of their journey seemingly contradicts the narrative in Bamidbar (33: 31 – 37) which sees Bnei Yisrael travelling in the opposite direction - from “Moserot” to “Bnei Yaakan”. Furthermore, according to this first account, the death of Aaron occurs on Mount Hor, further along the journey from Moserot.

The Rabbis are clearly aware of this apparent contradiction and offer different approaches to its reconciliation.

Ibn Ezra argues that in fact, there is no contradiction because the places mentioned in Devarim are distinct and different places from those mentioned in Bamidbar. On the other extreme, modern biblical critics use these verses as support for the argument that there are two different authors, as reflected in the two different accounts of the same story.

Rashi holds a middle ground. He reconciles the two accounts of the journey based on the Gemara that describes the reaction of the Jewish people to the death of Aaron (Rosh Hashana 3a). The fuller story behind Moshe’s words is explained by Rashi in the following way:

Aaron dies on Mount Hor and the Clouds of Glory that have cushioned and protected Bnei Yisrael for forty years disperse. Bnei Yisrael are left physically exposed and spiritually vulnerable. Emboldened by this perceived weakness, the Canaanite King of Arad wages war against them.

Despite forty years of a miraculous existence in the desert under Hashem’s care, Bnei Yisrael cannot overcome their primal impulse in the face of adversity. The nation cries out ‘let us appoint a leader and return to Egypt’. Overcome by the challenges facing them, Bnei Yisrael lose their way and flee. They retrace their steps from Mount Hor, past the wells of Bnei Yaakan to Moserah. The tribe of Levi, pursues them and a battle between the tribes ensues at Moserah. There are casualties on all sides (see also Rashi’s comments in Bamidbar 26:13).

It is at Moserah that Bnei Yisrael literally do battle with themselves. Here they are forced to confront their new reality without Aaron and this struggle leaves them depleted. It may also be the catalyst for them to express their grief over Aaron’s passing. Once they have done this, they are then able to reorient themselves and continue on their journey forward towards the Land of Israel.

It is interesting to note that the journey in Bamidbar (Numbers 33:31- 37) alludes to seven places where Bnei Yisrael camped before reaching Mount Hor (the eighth stop). If we follow the narrative of Rashi, Bnei Yisrael camped at seven places following their retreat from Mount Hor. Perhaps the significance of these seven stops can be seen to correspond to the seven days of shiva or mourning for the departed.

The journey to which Moshe refers in this week's parsha is the journey of grief and loss. It references Bnei Yisrael 'losing their way' after they lose Aaron.

Their experience of *disorientation* from life as it was known and then reorientation towards an altered reality - punctuated by the loss - is a foundational theme in both classic and more contemporary psychological models of grieving. Classic approaches conceptualise grieving as a staged process. Disorientation is characterised by experiences of:

- denial, anger, bargaining, and depression (based on the work of Elizabeth Kubler Ross) or
- shock, yearning /protest, despair (based on the theories of John Bowlby and Colin Murray Parkes)

What then follows is a reorientation expressed as acceptance and recovery.

The more contemporary approaches understand grieving as the movement between two parallel axes of disorienting and reorienting behaviour. Grieving is considered both a physical and emotional process according to the two-track model of bereavement¹. It is not a linear process, rather it continues throughout a person's life. According to the dual process model of coping with bereavement² we oscillate between coping with the experience of death and the life changes that result from it. As we grieve, we navigate our way through processes that focus on both loss and restoration.

This grieving experience is mirrored in the narrative of the midrash. As each of the leaders of Bnei Yisrael die, their accompanying miracles cease. Bnei Yisrael are forced to confront not only the death of their leader, their physical reality is a daily reminder of the leader's absence. According to the Midrash when Miram dies, Bnei Yisrael lose their continuing source of water. When Aaron dies, the Clouds of Glory dissipate. The loss is doubled. Bnei Yisrael must contend with the loss of Aaron and the loss of the effect of his presence in the world.

The journey of Bnei Yisrael described by Moshe in Parshat Ekev is echoed in our national experience today. Having just emerged from a mourning period, culminating in the fast day of Tisha B'Av, we now enter a period of comfort and consolation. Parshat Ekev is the second of the seven parshiot where we are comforted by the words of the Prophet Yishaya. Once again, we see this seven step process that guides our focus from loss toward restoration.

We are now at a point in the Jewish calendar when we begin to reorient ourselves and change our focus from one of mourning to self-reflection. Now, with the period of mourning behind us, we begin to look forward towards the month of Elul. We begin to focus on the opportunities to repair our relationships and deepen our connections to Hashem and to each other.



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