

D'rash B'midbar 5/23/20
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The one other time I remember giving the d'var on this portion was at one of our retreats quite a few years ago. That was very much on my mind as I was preparing this, given our current inability to travel and gather like that – and the Book of Numbers itself is about journeying together. So that cast a shadow as I was thinking of what to say.

I'm going to be focusing on just one phrase in the parsha, but to do that, I need to provide some context.

On its surface, B'midbar may be the dullest parsha in the entire annual cycle. Lists of names, lists of counts – all in repeated formulas (although Rachel did a memorable d'rash years ago talking about how the Torah trope is identical for each of the tribes, and what that signified). But the more one looks at it, the more interesting the text becomes.

One aspect of the text that's interesting to me is its very ordinariness. After all the grand moments and the revelations and the laws, this book and especially this portion, immerse us in the mundane. Even the names of the census takers, which appear nowhere else in the Torah, seem to have no symbolic significance (no “yah” in the names, for example); they are just ordinary folk. And on one level, the whole emphasis of the portion is on daily details – who had to do exactly what, how were things laid out, etc. It's the equivalent of telling someone about a camping trip by describing who carried the tent. Or describing a group house you lived in by detailing who did which chores. It gives a sense of the quotidian, but doesn't make for riveting story-telling. Yet that kind of daily-ness perhaps provides a sense of connection to our ancestors that more climactic moments do not.

Of course, the context actually makes the details convey something beyond the randomness of daily life. Many of the details show how the basic values of the community are captured and communicated by the way daily life is lived. What I spoke about in my long-ago d'rash was the way the layout of the marching and the camp embody the centrality of the Law, in much the way urban organization has conveyed societal values through more recent centuries.

But what struck me this time was something else. It's at the beginning of Chapter 3. The parsha is chock full of names and lineages, all offered, as usual, with no discernible emotion or comment – until we get to Nadab and Abihu. Then the text stops, and says they were killed by G_d for offering “alien fire.” This is not unique to this passage. It seems that just about any time Nadab and Abihu are mentioned in the Torah, the text stops and summarizes their demise. And while the Torah rarely refers back to past events – and rarely uses past events to clarify chronology – the portion we read on Yom Kippur begins, “After the deaths of the two sons of Aaron...”

Why is this? It could be for theological reasons – to emphasize the consequences of disobedience, or that even Aaron's family must obey G_d's commandments. But it doesn't feel like that to me; it feels emotional.

That's in keeping with the story itself. After Nadab and Abihu die, and Moses tries to explain it, comes what I find to be the most poignant line in the entire Torah: "And Aaron was silent."

It feels to me like the deaths of Nadab and Abihu were an ineradicable, unassimilable event. One couldn't easily make sense of it or just view it as part of the flow of history. It was too disturbing, too inexplicable, too outside the natural order of things. It caught in your throat. Each time it came up, it just raised unanswerable questions anew. And so the text has to stop; the text itself can't just assimilate it into the flow of names and actions.

What makes an event have that effect, and for how long? The Holocaust is like that for us. If we're talking about someone who perished in the Shoah, we often will stop and note that – not just say, for example, my mother had a brother named so-and-so. Deaths from AIDS are often treated that way, as well. In the black community, my sense is that there may be a similar phenomenon when referring to someone who was "born into slavery." What is it about such events, such cataclysms, that cause us to stop the flow of what we're saying, and pause to highlight the context?

I was thinking about this recently, in part, because in a couple of conversations, friends said the COVID deaths still felt very abstract – despite the numbers, despite knowing individuals touched by the disease. And I was thinking that was partly because COVID hasn't yet cohered into a story with a single message or unifying moral, the way war deaths often do, or the way even some diseases do. Will we stop, in future years, when discussing an individual, and note that they died of COVID – either because there's a clear message or because (as with Nadab and Abihu) we're painfully aware that there isn't?

For a long time, society didn't think of the 1918 flu pandemic that way, it seems. Its scale was astonishing at the time – and unlike COVID, it was more likely to kill the young. But it didn't cohere into an easy story, or it was overshadowed by World War I, or it was too painful to recall, or burying it was part of getting past the war – but for whatever reason, for a long time it wasn't part of the collective memory of the period. It didn't even loom large in histories; I don't think I learned about it until grad school – when the role of disease in history, in general, was getting more attention.

So what is it that makes an event searing in a way that we can't just sweep by it, even years later – or in the case of Nadab and Abihu, now more than two millennia later – for a society or for us individually?