

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Masei

This week we complete the book of Bamidbar. The Jews, who now find themselves on the shores of the Jordan River, are finally ready to enter Israel and this week's parsha appropriately focuses on preparing them for that great adventure. They learn the borders of the Promised Land and they learn the process for divvying up the land among the tribes and their families. And then they learn the laws of murder.

Yes, murder. The laws of accidental and premeditated homicide appear in this week's parsha. While it's true that the cities of the Levites also served as cities of refuge for accidental murderers, the Torah did not have to launch into a detailed legal discussion when all it wanted to do is tell us where the Levites should live. But the Torah did not get carried away on a tangent. Understanding the evil of murder in all of its forms is an essential prerequisite for emigration to Israel.

"Do not take ransom for the life of a murderer who is under the death penalty, since he must be put to death. [Similarly,] if one has fled to his refuge city, do not take ransom to allow him to return and live in the land before the high priest dies.

"Do not pollute the land in which you live; it is blood that pollutes the land. When blood is shed in the land, it cannot be atoned for except through the blood of the person who shed it. You must not defile the land upon which you live and in which I dwell, since I, G-d, dwell among the Israelites" (Bamidbar 35:31-34).

Here, at the very end of the discussion, G-d finally explains why we are going through all of this now. Before entering the Holy Land, it is imperative that the Jews understand that every case of homicide must be properly prosecuted. Not only for the righteous pursuit of justice, but because G-d is dwelling among us. G-d cannot tolerate overlooked bloodshed, for it "defiles" the land. The implication is obvious. If homicide is not prosecuted, G-d will move out.

The Midrash hears yet another message in this verse. "You must not defile the land upon which you live..." If the land is defiled in this way then not only will G-d move out, the Jews will be exiled too. This is familiar idea and, in fact, the First Temple



JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

continued ...

was destroyed and the Jews were exiled for the sin of murder, among other things (Talmud, Yoma 9b). However, there is something new here. In our verse we are not only talking about murder, we are also talking about accidental homicide. Why would the Jews lose their land for that? Even if there was negligence, in the end it was just an accident. Why would failure to prosecute such cases result in the devastating punishment of national exile?

The Netziv of Volozhin (Rabbi Naftoli Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1817-1893) has a brilliant answer to this question. No, the Jews won't be exiled for the sin of not prosecuting. But the land will be defiled and G-d will be forced to move out. And if G-d leaves, then we must go with Him.

The Jewish People cannot exist without G-d in their midst. As much as Israel is our national homeland and as much as Israel is the ideal place for Jews and Judaism, if G-d is forced out by our misdeeds then we must go with Him, for living with G-d takes priority over living in Israel. That is the message of the verse.

With this idea the Netziv explains a difficult Midrash. The Midrash teaches that wherever the Jews are exiled, G-d is with them. The Midrash brings numerous biblical verses to support this teaching and at the end of its list it brings our verse too. How do we see this idea in our verse? It is as the Netziv said. Our verse is explaining to us that unprosecuted homicides will result in national exile not because of the crime per se but because we must go with G-d. G-d and the Jews are simply inseparable.

No one should ever make the mistake of thinking that the Shechina only dwells in the Holy Land and if the Jews are forced out then they have left G-d behind. Nothing could be further from the truth. No matter what happens, no matter how low we go, even if we let murder slide, the Temple is destroyed and the nation is exiled – G-d is always with us. The Jews had to know this essential truth before they entered the Promised Land.

Shabbat Shalom

JSN Parsha Team

3626 El Camino Real
(650) 493-5764



Palo Alto, CA 94306
www.jsn.info