

Chukas – Modim Anachnu Lach – Bernhard Bergman

' תמוז תשע"ו – 16th July 2016 – שבת פי' חקת

The start of the Mishna on daf 54a of Berachos, sets out the obligation to make a special blessing when seeing a place where miracles have been performed for the Jewish people.

The subsequent gemorrah explains that we learn this concept from Yisro who, upon hearing from Moshe Rabbeinu of all the miracles that G-d had performed for the Jewish people in Egypt, blessed Hashem for having done all this. (The astute reader will have observed that Yisro was not actually at the site of these miracles when making this blessing, a contradiction that is resolved by some commentators who note that the requirement to recite this blessing applies even when seeing the beneficiaries of such miracles, in Yisro's case, upon meeting Moshe in the wilderness (Ritva).)

The gemorrah then goes on to list a number of places where miracles have been performed for the Jewish people and where, upon seeing these sites, the requirement to recite the abovementioned blessing would be triggered. At the start of this list are three "crossings" undertaken, namely, (i) the crossing of the Red Sea (Shemos 14:22), (ii) the crossing of the Jordan (Joshua 3:17) and (iii) the crossing of the canyons of Arnon (our Sedrah, Bamidbar 21:13).

Whilst the first two of these crossings involved miracles that are openly revealed in the Scriptures, the gemorrah wonders what miracle was performed for the Jewish people at the crossing of the canyons of Arnon. Relating the story that is well known through Rashi's commentary on the Parsha, the gemorrah relates how, when the Israelites were passing through the canyons of Arnon, the Amorites came and hid in caves they had made in these mountains, with the intent of attacking the Jewish people from above with missiles as they passed through below. What the Amorites did not know, continues the gemorrah, was that the Aron (Ark) was travelling ahead of the Israelites, flattening the mountains before them (having myself just returned from a mountain walking "holiday" in the Alps, struggling up many a mountain, I can appreciate how welcome this "mountain flattening" must have been!). When the Aron arrived at the canyons of Arnon, it caused the mountains on either side to move towards each other, killing the Amorites who lay in wait. The Israelite camp passed through blissfully unaware of the miracle that had occurred.

So how did they find out? Quoting the posuk in our Sedrah (Bamidbar 21:15) "Es vaheiv b'sufah", the gemorrah explains that "Es" and (i.e. "va") "Heiv" were metzoraim (lepers) who, as a consequence of their predicament were travelling at the rear of ("b'sof") the Israelite camp. It was only when they passed through the canyons of Arnon, by which time says Rashi, the mountains had returned to their original state, that they saw the streams of blood of the Amorites flowing from the mountains. They related this to the rest of the camp who then sang Shira (Bamidbar 21:15) - "v'eshed haNechalim asher natah leshevet Ar v'nishan li'gevul Moav" ("and an outpouring of the rivers when it veered to dwell at Ar and leaned against the border of Moab").

We give thanks to You Hashem - Modim Anachnu Lach - for Your Miracles that are constantly with us!

Written l'ilui nishmas avi mori Shmuel Zvi ben Dov whose Yahrzeit fell on Friday (9th Tammuz)
