

Mattot-Ma'sei has many examples of how the Rabbis teased implications from the wording of the text, sometimes that we might not have expected.

Num. 31:2: AVENGE THE VENGEANCE OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL OF THE MIDIANITES; AFTERWARDS, YOU SHALL BE GATHERED TO YOUR PEOPLE. R. Judah remarked: If Moses had wanted to live many more years, he could have lived, for the Holy One ... told him: AVENGE and AFTERWARD YOU SHALL BE GATHERED, Scripture making his death dependent on the punishment of Midian. But the text apprises you of the excellence of Moses. He thought: Shall Israel's vengeance be delayed merely that I may live? Instantly, [in the next verse] MOSES SPOKE ... ARM MEN FROM AMONG YOU FOR THE WAR.<sup>1</sup>

And the warriors tried to dodge the draft:

Num 31:5: AND THERE WERE DELIVERED OUT OF THE THOUSANDS OF ISRAEL, A THOUSAND OF EVERY TRIBE. [One interpretation:] THEY WERE DELIVERED signifies that it was done against their will. Seeing that Scripture had made the death of Moses dependent on the vengeance against the Midianites, they said, "Shall we go against Midian and let Moses die?" So they refrained from going. The Holy One ... said to Moses, "Cast lots for the tribes and they will be given up of themselves."<sup>2</sup>

And why did not Moses lead the troops? Or Joshua, who had previously led war efforts? Recall when young Moses fled Egypt, he went to Midian and married Zipporah, a Midianite woman.

... he thought: It is not right that I should vex one who has been good to me. The proverb says: "Do not cast a stone into a cistern from which you have drunk." ... Why did he send Phinehas? He said: "The one who began the performance of the precept should finish it. It was he who turned away His wrath ... let him finish the sacred task!"<sup>3</sup>

Further, Pinchas, although a grandson of Aaron, hence of the tribe of Levi, was on his mother's side a descendant of Joseph, hence was additionally motivated to war against the Midianites, whose ancestors took Joseph into Egyptian slavery.<sup>4</sup>

The Rabbis contrast Moses and Joshua. At *Josh.* 1:5, G-d says, AS I WAS WITH MOSES, SO I WILL BE WITH YOU.

Joshua, then, should have lived 120 years, like *Moshe Rabenu*. Why was his life shortened by 10 years? ... when his turn came to fight with the 31 [Canaanite] kings, he thought: If I kill them at once I shall ... die, as *Moshe Rabenu* died. He began to dally in the wars ... as it says (*Josh.* 11:18) JOSHUA MADE WAR A LONG TIME WITH ALL THOSE KINGS. Said the Holy One ... to him, "So this is what you have done.... I shall shorten your life by ten years!"

The end of Balaam inspired tales of magic:

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<sup>1</sup> [NR 22:2] – p. 854

<sup>2</sup> [NR 22:3] – p. 855

<sup>3</sup> [NR 22:4] – p. 856

<sup>4</sup> [G] – p. 794, citing many earlier commentaries

... when he saw Phinehas ... he flew into the air ... by magic arts.... Phinehas shouted to his army, “Is there any one among us who is able to fly after this villain?” Zaliah [of the tribe of Dan] ... flew high into the air. Balaam, however, surpassed him, and took a path ... through five ... layers of air [disappearing from Zaliah’s view]. Phinehas, ... by means of a magical invocation ... dispelled the clouds that covered Balaam, and the Zaliah forced Balaam to descend to earth and appear before Phinehas. He began to implore Phinehas to spare his life, promising never again to try to curse Israel, but Phinehas replied: “Art not thou the Aramean Laban who tried to destroy our father Jacob?” [Laban was Aramean. I think Phinehas refers to Laban’s broken promises to Jacob.]... He then ordered Zaliah to kill Balaam.... [A fierce contest of magic between Zaliah and Balaam took place, until Zaliah finally prevailed and killed Balaam.]... his bones rotted, and from them arose several species of harmful snakes.<sup>5</sup>

In Mas’ei, we recount the many stages of the 40-years’ journey in the wilderness. The Rabbis ask

Why were all these stations privileged to be recorded in the Torah? In return for their having received Israel, the Holy One ... will ... [reward them], as it is written, THE WILDERNESS AND THE PARCHED LAND SHALL BE GLAD; AND THE DESERT SHALL REJOICE, AND BLOSSOM AS THE ROSE (Isaiah 35:1). Now, if the wilderness will be thus rewarded for having received Israel, is it not certain that one who received scholars into one’s house will be rewarded all the more?<sup>6</sup>

#### References

[G] Louis Ginzburg, *Legends of the Jews*, v.2, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia, 2003

[NR] *Numbers Rabbah* – see *The Midrash Rabbah* (v. III – *Numbers, Deuteronomy*), H. Freedman and M. Simon, eds., Soncino Press, London, 1977

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<sup>5</sup> [G] – pp. 795-796, citing many earlier commentaries

<sup>6</sup> [NR 33:4] – p. 865