

# Parsha Ponders

Shemos | December 24, 2021 | 20 Teves 5781

## *Impoverishment and blemishes<sup>1</sup>*

ויאמר יקוק אל-משה במדין שב מצרים כי-מתו כל-האנשים המבקשים את-נפשו

Hashem said to Moshe in Midian: “Return to Egypt, for those who seek<sup>2</sup> your life have perished”<sup>3</sup>

Moshe spent half<sup>4</sup> of his life in Midian as a fugitive. He killed an Egyptian to save the life of a fellow Jew. He took refuge in Midian and raised a family. To his surprise, Hashem tasked him with the mission to release the Jewish people from slavery. As a form of reassurance<sup>5</sup>, Hashem told him that those who sought his life have perished. Our Sages teach us<sup>6</sup> that this can’t be understood literally, as we know that those who reported Moshe to the authorities were Dasan and Aviram. They were among those who were part of Korach’s rebellion in the wilderness. What does it mean that they died? Our Sages tell us that they became impoverished<sup>7</sup>. As such, since they lost their prestige and influence, Moshe no longer needed to feel threatened by them<sup>8</sup>.

The commentaries<sup>9</sup> are bothered with how our Sages knew that Dasan and Aviram became impoverished. They for sure didn’t literally die, but we are taught<sup>10</sup> that there are four people who are considered lacking life, even though they are still alive: someone who is poor, someone who is blind, someone who is without children, and someone who is stricken with *tzaraas*, a leprous-like skin blemish. Maybe Dasan and Aviram were one of the other three categories of those lacking life? What forced our Sages to say they became impoverished?

The answer is that it can’t be that Dasan and Aviram became blind, because there is a reference<sup>11</sup> to their eyesight during their later rebellion with Korach. It can’t be that they were stricken with *tzaraas*, as

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Shalal Rav to Exodus 4:19

<sup>2</sup> As we will see, they didn’t literally die. This could be hinted to in the fact that the verse is written in the present, המבקשים, and not in the past, שביקשו. I found the Torah Temimah *ad. loc.* § 11 says the same

<sup>3</sup> Exodus *loc. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> Assuming Moshe was twenty when he left Egypt (Shemos Rabbah 1:27; Seichel Tov to Exodus 2:11). The verse says he was eighty when he returned to Egypt (Exodus 7:7), and he was 120 when he died (Deuteronomy 31:2). Other opinions in the *Midrash* say that he was forty (Shemos Rabbah), or five (Tanchuma Yashan Va’eira § 17, brought in Yalkut Shimoni Shemos § 166), when he left Egypt. See other opinions in L’Machseh Atik to Exodus 2:11

<sup>5</sup> See Meshech Chochmah *ad. loc.*, who learns from here that if they hadn’t “died”, Moshe wouldn’t have been obligated to save the Jewish people. Rav Asher Weiss in a *shiur* disagreed, holding that saving the Jewish people takes precedence over one’s life. As well, if Hashem is directly commanding you, you don’t calculate if it’s safe or not. *Cf.* I Samuel 16:2

<sup>6</sup> Nedarim 64b. See there how we know this

<sup>7</sup> Rashi and Targum “Yonasan” to Exodus 4:19 bring this as well

<sup>8</sup> Rosh to Exodus *loc. cit.* and Tosafos to Avodah Zarah 5a s.v. שירדו אלא say they lost the ability to bribe the king.

Ran to Nedarim 7b s.v. כי שנאמר and Rosh to Nedarim 64b s.v. עני ומצורע say once they became poor the king would no longer listen to them. Gur Aryeh *ad. loc.* § 12 says אין השעה משחקת להם (see Berachos 7b). See

Maharal’s Nesivos Olam Nesiv HaOsher Chapter 2, who explains why specifically wealth is dependant on time

<sup>9</sup> Ran *loc. cit.*; Tosafos to Nedarim 7b s.v. עניות כמיתה; Tosafos to Avodah Zarah *loc. cit.*; Chizkuni and Da’as Zekeinim *ad. loc.* The Nachalas Yaakov *ad. loc.* brings the Ran and Tosafos to Avodah Zarah, and also cites the Rosh. Presumably he means the Rosh to Nedarim *loc. cit.*, but the Rosh also says this in his commentary on the Torah. Maskil LeDovid *ad. loc.* brings the Ran and Tosafos to Nedarim, Gur Aryeh *ad. loc.* brings Tosafos to Nedarim, and Sifsei Chachamim *ad. loc.* brings the Ran

<sup>10</sup> Nedarim 64b

<sup>11</sup> Numbers 16:14

one with *tzaraas* has to leave the Jewish encampment, and we are told<sup>12</sup> that they were living amongst their brethren<sup>13</sup>. It also can't be that they were without children, as that is no reason for Moshe to be consoled that they no longer could seek his life<sup>14</sup>. It has to be then that they became impoverished and lost their influence<sup>15</sup>.

However, one could ask on this proof. We are taught<sup>16</sup> that the Jews were purified of all their blemishes when they received the Torah. They became perfect and immortal. Perhaps then Dasan and Aviram were either blind or afflicted with *tzaraas* at the time of the Exodus, and the verses proving otherwise were after they had been healed. Who says then that the verse saying they had died means they became impoverished<sup>17</sup>? The answer to this is that we are also taught<sup>18</sup> that the blemishes of the Jews returned to them when they sinned with the Golden Calf<sup>19</sup>. They were no longer perfect, and could die again or become blemished. We cannot say that the verses which show they weren't blind or that they lacked *tzaraas* was because they had been healed. It must be then that they were never blind and never contracted *tzaraas*. We can again conclude that they became impoverished.

There are those<sup>20</sup> who ask on this resolution which demonstrates that they never had *tzaraas*. Again, since we see they didn't have *tzaraas* later, as they weren't evicted from the Jewish encampment, it must be that they never had *tzaraas*. We can't say they were healed when the Torah was given, as it would have returned when they sinned with the Golden Calf. The problem is we have an explicit *Mishnah* which teaches us<sup>21</sup> that *tzaraas* afflictions which occurred before the Torah carry no spiritual impurity. This is learned from a verse regarding *tzaraas*, which says "when a person will get an affliction"<sup>22</sup>, excluding someone who already had one before the Torah was given<sup>23</sup>. As such, even if

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<sup>12</sup> The Ran *loc. cit.* cites Deuteronomy 11:6. Chizkuni *loc. cit.* cites Numbers 16:24. Da'as Zekeinim *loc. cit.* simply say that we never find that they were expelled from the camp, and both Tosafos simply state as a fact that they were in the Jewish encampment. Rosh to Nedarim *loc. cit.* says if they were afflicted with *tzaraas* they would have been sent out of the camp

<sup>13</sup> The first two points are said by all those who ask the question

<sup>14</sup> Ran and Tosafos to Avodah Zarah *loc. cit.* Tosafos to Nedarim, Rosh to Nedarim and Exodus, and Da'as Zekeinim *loc. cit.* say that the verse mentions that they had children (Numbers 16:27). Da'as Zekeinim then ask, perhaps they had children later, so it's no proof that they didn't have children at that time? They answer that someone who is destined to have children later isn't called מת. They also end up saying like the other commentaries, that not having children isn't a consolation for Moshe

<sup>15</sup> Da'as Zekeinim *loc. cit.* also brings a hint to this in the verse itself, which says מתו, which has the same numerical value as ירדו מנכסיהם, *im hakollel*

<sup>16</sup> Vayikra Rabbah 18:4, based on Song of Songs 4:7; Bamidbar Rabbah 7:1

<sup>17</sup> Similar to what was stated above (see note 14), even if they had *tzaraas* or were blind, they could still influence the king to kill Moshe (Rosh to Nedarim says this point on *tzaraas*, not on being childless). This is why many of the commentaries end with this point, as it seems to be the definitive answer to the initial question. Gur Aryeh *loc. cit.* as well says this point on all three alternatives to becoming poor. However, the rest of this piece will focus on the proof that they *didn't* have *tzaraas* when Moshe returned to Egypt

<sup>18</sup> Bamidbar Rabbah *loc. cit.*

<sup>19</sup> Exodus Chapter 32

<sup>20</sup> Sheilas Shalom § 92 s.v. ואת זה, a commentary on the Sheiltos by Rav Yeshaya Pick-Berlin, cited by Gilyon

HaShas to Nedarim *loc. cit.* He quotes this question from מהר"ש סקוטש חביבי הרב המופלא בר לבב צדיק תמים מהר"ש סקוטש Chasam Sofer to Nedarim 7b s.v. אמר רבי חנין says מקשים העולם

<sup>21</sup> Negayim 7:1

<sup>22</sup> Leviticus 13:2

<sup>23</sup> Bartenura *ad. loc.*

Dasan and Aviram had *tzaraas* during the Egypt, they never would have been evicted from the camp! Who says then that they became impoverished, and that's why they were called dead? Maybe they were afflicted with *tzaraas*!

Obviously these commentaries were aware of this *Mishnah*. Therefore, we are forced to say<sup>24</sup> that since all blemishes were healed when the Torah was given, and they returned when they worshipped the idol, it must be then that these second *tzaraas* afflictions were considered brand new<sup>25</sup>. It was considered as if they had been afflicted *tzaraas* for the very first time, after the Torah had been given. These afflictions would be spiritually impure, even if the ones from before the Torah was given wouldn't have been. As such, since we see that Dasan and Aviram didn't have to leave the camp, again we must say that they never had *tzaraas*. The only remaining option then is to say they became impoverished.

The problem with this approach is it makes the teaching of "when a person *will* get an affliction" entirely unnecessary. There could never be a case where someone had *tzaraas* before the Torah was given and it won't be spiritually impure, since everyone's *tzaraas* was taken away and returned when they sinned with the Golden Calf. When they were afflicted again, it's considered as if they were afflicted after the Torah was given. Why then do we have a teaching that afflictions from before the Torah aren't spiritually impure? We have to say that the Torah wasn't relying on a miracle<sup>26</sup>. True, it ended up becoming not practical, but if there wouldn't be a miraculous healing of the entire nation, *tzaraas* afflictions before the Torah was given wouldn't have caused spiritual impurity.

The Chasam Sofer relates<sup>27</sup> that there's a fundamental flaw in this answer<sup>28</sup>. It's one thing to say that the Torah doesn't rely on a *future* miracle. However, we're talking about a miracle that had *already* occurred. When the Torah was given, everyone's blemishes were healed. When the laws of ritual purity and impurity were taught, the miracle had already happened. The Torah then says that "when a person *will* get an affliction", to teach the law that *tzaraas* before the Torah was given doesn't impart spiritual impurity. Why then was this law given, if it has no practical applications? There's no need to "rely on a miracle", since the miracle already happened.

As a result of this, the Chasam Sofer provides an innovative approach to what happened to everyone's blemishes. It's actually a dispute when the Jews' blemishes returned. Some Sages say that it was when they sinned with the Golden Calf. Others say<sup>29</sup> it happened after the episode where they complained upon leaving Mount Sinai<sup>30</sup>. The law actually follows the latter opinion<sup>31</sup>. If so, when the commentaries say that Dasan and Aviram couldn't have been healed of their *tzaraas*, since it returned when the Jews sinned with the Golden Calf, that wasn't very precise. They weren't being exact, and really meant when

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<sup>24</sup> "וכדי להציל במקום שיש מצילין להדר פני כל הגדולים תוס' והרא"ש והר"ן נאזרתי לומר וכו'"

<sup>25</sup> פנים חדשות

<sup>26</sup> This is based on Tosafos to Yoma 21a s.v. במקומן נבלעין regarding *terumas hadeshen*

<sup>27</sup> Chasam Sofer *loc. cit.*

<sup>28</sup> "במחילת כבודו לא דק"

<sup>29</sup> Bamidbar Rabbah 7:4

<sup>30</sup> Numbers Chapter 11

<sup>31</sup> The Chasam Sofer proves this from Sukkah 25a, where the *gemarra* wants to know who were those who were spiritually impure from contact with the deceased and requested to bring the Pesach offering. The Chasam Sofer asks that what kind of question is this? There weren't people who died all this time? It must be that no one died until the episode of the complainers. This also explains Rashi to Exodus 30:16, and answers the Ramban *ad. loc.*'s questions on him

the Jews complained upon leaving Mount Sinai. What's more, when we are taught that *tzaraas* from before the Torah was given isn't impure, the intent is *tzaraas* from before *the law* was given. These laws were taught upon the completion of the *Mishkan*<sup>32</sup>. As well, even though the Jews were cured of all their blemishes between the giving of the Torah and the episode of the complainers, once they sinned with the Golden Calf, they were still able to contract skin blemishes. What the above law is then teaching us is that blemishes which occurred before the *Mishkan* was completed don't impart spiritual impurity after the laws were taught<sup>33</sup>.

In summary, Dasan and Aviram were out to execute Moshe. They were very powerful, and were trying to get Pharaoh to punish him. Hashem told Moshe not to worry, as they had lost their life. This obviously cannot be taken literally. It cannot mean that they were blind or had *tzaraas*, as we know they were free from blemishes later in the Torah. If they had blemishes before the Torah was given, they would have received them again after the episode of the complainers. It also didn't matter if they had children or not. It must be that they had become impoverished, and lost their ability to influence the king. Moshe then had nothing to worry about.

Good Shabbos

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<sup>32</sup> [Gittin 60a](#)

<sup>33</sup> For more approaches to this, see [Maharatz Chiyos](#) and [Mitzpeh Eisan](#) to [Nedarim 7b](#)