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Comparison of Exodus 32 and Numbers 14

By Rabbi Jeff Leynor

Moses filled many roles in the wilderness context. He was a military leader, lawgiver, judge and prophet, but if it were not for his role as intercessor, Israel would not have survived the ordeals of the wilderness. I have found parallels of Moses' intercession in Exodus 32:9-14, 32-33 and Numbers 14:11-24. Both of these episodes occur after a great breach by the Israelites. *In Exodus this concerns the Golden Calf, and in Numbers the story of the spies.*

In Exodus 32:7 God inform Moses of the actions of the Israelites. What is interesting here is that God's language is one of disowning. He says, "*Go down for your people have corrupted themselves.*" In Numbers 14:11, God speaks to Moses and asks, "*How long will this people treat Me with contempt?*" In both of these cases there is a definite tone of separation and alienation on the part of God. This tone is not unfamiliar to most people, because it sounds like any parent who is angry at a child and says, "*Did you see what your son or daughter had done?*" This appears to be a reoccurring theme in the Torah – whenever Israel does what is right, the Torah proclaims we are God's people, but when a sin is involved, the Torah tells all that God has separated Himself from us. There is a difference between the character of the sins in the above two stories. In the Exodus account the sin was one of disobedience. In verse eight God states that Israel has "*turned aside quickly out of the way which I commanded them.*" In Numbers we observe a total lack of faith on the part of the Israelites.

From a literary point of view, the writer is using repetition, which fits into Alter's category of repetition. Both texts have something in common -- a great trial of the Lord and then the intercession of Moses. Sternberg's categories of forecast, enactments and report fit well into the story of the spies. Contrast is used in Exodus and Numbers showing the relationships between the following: (1) God and Moses (2) Moses and the people (3) God and the people (4) Joshua/Caleb and the other spies.

The next point we will focus upon in the comparison of the two chapters concerns intercession cues. The intercession cue for Moses in Exodus is 32:10 where God

says, "Now leave me alone..." I think it is obvious that God does not wish to be left alone. He is opening the door for Moses to intercede and stop a swift punishment of everyone because God says He will consume them. I feel the tradition of negotiating with God in the same sense that Abraham did is continued here. The intercession cues in Numbers are the unanswered questions in 14:11, where God asks, "*How long... despise me? How long... not believe in Me?*" This is followed by another threat of hitting the Israelites with pestilence and destroying them. These cues are not only important because they allow room for Moses to persuade God not to fulfill them, but also because they spur Moses on to action. There is a Midrash in Shemot (Exodus) Rabbah 42:10 which talks about a king who became angry with his son and takes him into a room alone to kill him and shouts; "*Leave me alone to kill my son.*" The boy's tutor standing outside reasoned, both the king and his son are alone in the room so why does the king say, "leave me alone?" *The real reason must be that the king wants the tutor to go in and make peace between them.*

In Exodus 32:10 Numbers 14:12 God in His anger tells Moses that He will make of him a great nation. In essence, He repeats to Moses the identical promise made to Abraham in Genesis 12:2. It is possible this is a device to show the extraordinary character of Moses. He rejects any suggestion of separating his personal destiny from that of his people. I believe this is part of a conscious effort by the writer to lessen the importance of Moses' family. It is Joshua who takes over after Moses, not the sons of Moses. There are no dynastic designs.

How does Moses respond to God's promise of making him a great nation in the Exodus account – *simply by reminding God of the former promise He made to the patriarchs.* In verse 13 Moses tells God to remember Abraham, Isaac and Israel. He reminds God of His oath to multiply their seed as the stars of heaven and to give them the land of promise, that they will inherit it forever. *I found it interesting that Jacob was not mentioned here, but Israel.* This could be a well-placed hint to God that the Israel mentioned here could not only mean Jacob/Israel, but the people itself. In verse eleven (11), Moses shifts the emphasis back to the relationship between God and the people when he asks God why He is so angry with His people. This subtle maneuvering on the part of Moses negates any thoughts by God of dispensing with Israel and making a new nation from Moses. He is gently reminding God not only of His promise, but that God took the time and went to a great deal of trouble to deliver His people out of Egypt with great power and a mighty hand. In Numbers there is no mention of the patriarchs themselves, but there is a reference to the promise of the land in 14:16.

The most obvious parallel between Exodus and Numbers exists in the line of reasoning used by Moses explaining *why God should not destroy the people.* The Number's line of reasoning seems to echo the line of reasoning in Exodus,

continuing and elaborating the point. *In the Exodus account Moses tells God that the Egyptians will say that the only reason the Lord brought the Israelites out of Egypt was to kill them in the wilderness.* The account in the Numbers story (14:13-16) is much more complex. It begins again with a reference to the Egyptians. What will happen when they hear that the Lord – the One who is identified with Israel by the signs and wonders He performed in Egypt; the One who is in their midst in the wilderness with signs like the pillars of fire and cloud – has destroyed Israel to the man? What will the nations, who have heard of the fame of the Lord, say? *Will they conclude that He did this because He was not able to bring His people into the land which He had already promised them?*

The fact that Egypt is mentioned in both places symbolizes its importance because Egypt was the site of the signs of God's power. The writer specifically mentions the Egyptians "saying, hearing and seeing." The reference to Egypt also poses some questions about the nature of God. In Exodus the implication about God, in the eyes of the Egyptians, is *that God is not a "good" God, but a God of "evil."* Why else would He take the Israelites out of Egypt only to annihilate them in the wilderness? In Numbers the implication is *that God is not the all-powerful God He says He is, because He cannot fulfill His own promises, or even control His people.* In essence, God must wipe out Israel to cover up His own weakness. The Egyptians would interpret Israel's destruction as bringing shame on God Himself and bringing His name or reputation into disrepute.

Also in Numbers a universal aspect is introduced – *the sensitivity of God to what the nations will say.* This is a major ingredient of the argumentation of Moses. **God is not only the God of Israel, but of the whole world.** How can the nations perceive the destruction of Israel in any other way except that God is as prone to whims as their gods? It appears as if Moses is using divine psychology on God trying to convince Him not to destroy the Israelites. *I believe this represents the Jewish concept that one can sway God by prayer and just actions.*

In Exodus 32:12 Moses pleads for his people. *He asks God to turn from His fierce wrath and to repent of this evil against His people.* In 32:14 there seems to be a very pat answer to Moses' request, *"And the Lord repented of the evil which He said He would do to His people."* After reading God's response one is lulled into a feeling of security that God will not carry out any punishment at all – until 32:32-33. Here Moses, who has already sacrificed his own family life, his own hopes and desires, is now willing to sacrifice his very life. He says to the Lord, *"If You will not forgive their sin then blot me out of Your book which You have written."* Again this is a literary device revealing Moses' total lack of self-concern. The feeling of security that all is forgiven is removed in 32:33. *God answers that only those who have sinned against Him will He blot out of His book.* The chapter ends telling us that God did punish the people because of the calf.

Moses' pleading for Israel is much more involved in Numbers. In 14:17 *Moses is gently reminding God about His forgiving nature. He says, "The Lord is slow to anger and plenteous in loving-kindness, forgiving iniquity and transgression..."* Even though a few lines later God says He has pardoned according to Moses' request for mercy for Israel, don't overlook His statement concerning those who did not listen to His voice and those who despise Him, they will not see the land of promise. Contrary to a number of modern interpretations, God will not let the guilty go unpunished. *Often it is overlooked that Moses does not attempt to mitigate Israel's sin. His aim is that the nation should continue and Moses agrees that the guilty parties should be punished.* Before the Ten Commandments were given, God seems to be less strict with Israel – *maybe it was because they didn't know the rules at that point in time.* I believe that the Numbers account is more elaborate, probably because Israel should have known by that time what was required of them. *Maybe it takes more effort on the part of Moses to convince God not to destroy them.*

BHC

July Memorials

In Loving Memory

**MARJORIE
NEELLEY
PITNER**

**December 30, 1914
July 17, 2007**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

In Their Remembrance

In Their Remembrance

*May their memories inspire us to seek those
qualities of mind and heart which they
shared when we walked life's journey
together.*

*May we help to bring closer to fulfillment
their highest ideals and noblest strivings.
May their memories deepen our loyalty to
those things which we valued and shared --
faith, love, peace and devotion.*

*As long as we live, they too will live; for
they are now a part of us, as we remember
them.*

(Inspired from prayers found in Yitzhor
Reflections - The New Mahzor - The Prayer
Book Press)

In Loving Memory

**FANNIE EDNA
GRAHAM
WARD**

**July 15, 1891
July 10, 1982**

*May you dwell under His
wings in complete
SHALOM forever!*

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