

Zera Shimshon

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Chapter XLIII: Masei (Num. 33:1–36:13)

Essay 2. Sparks of holiness in the wilderness

"וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת־מוֹצְאֵיהֶם לְמַסְעֵיהֶם עַל־פִּי ה' וְאֵלֶּה מַסְעֵיהֶם לְמוֹצְאֵיהֶם. "קִשָּׁה מָהוּ הַכֶּפֶל, וְעוֹד לָמָּה מִתְחִלָּה הַקִּדִּים מוֹצְאֵיהֶם" וְלִבְסוּף הַקִּדִּים "מַסְעֵיהֶם". וַיֵּשׁ לֹאמַר שֶׁכָּתְבוּ הַמְּקוֹבְלִים שֶׁבְּאֵלוֹ הַמַּסְעוֹת הַחֲלִישׁוֹ פֶּחַ הַקְּלִיפּוֹת הַשׁוֹכְנוֹת בְּמִדְבָּר, "נִחַשׁ שָׂרָף וְעַקְרָב וְצַמְאוֹן" וְכוּ'. וְהוֹצִיאוּ בְּלַעַם מִפִּיהֶם שֶׁהוֹצִיאוּ מִשֵּׁם כָּל גִּיצוֹצוֹת הַקְּדוּשׁוֹת, וְאֵילוֹ הָיוּ זֹכִים הָיוּ מוֹצִיִּים אוֹתָם הַגִּיצוֹצוֹת בְּזִמְן מוֹעֵט וְלִפִּי שֶׁחֲטָאוּ וְהִצְרִיכוּ לְהִתְעַכֵּב שָׁם זְמַן הַרְבֵּה.

“Moses wrote the starting points of their journeys as directed by the L-rd; and these were their journeys, by starting points” (Num. 33:2). There’s a **question on** what reason there is for **the doubling** of the words “starting points” and “journeys,” **and also, why at the beginning** of the verse, the word **“starting points” preceded** the word “journeys,” **and at the end** the word **“journeys” preceded** the word “starting points.” **It can be said that the Kabbalists wrote that through these journeys, the power of the *klipot* (husks or shells of impurity) that dwelled in the desert, “the fiery serpent, and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it” (Deut. 8:15),¹ had their power diminished. They removed what they had swallowed from their mouths,² they who removed and collected from [the wilderness] all of the sparks of holiness.** That is, sparks of holiness are intermingled with husks of impurity. In the wilderness, the *klipot* were especially strong. As the Israelites traveled through the wilderness, setting up camp and worshipping G-d at the Tabernacle, the *klipot* weakened, and the Israelites were able to remove the impurities from themselves, as they gathered the sparks of holiness to take them out of the wilderness and bring

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¹ In parshat Chukat, Num. 21:6, we read that G-d sent fiery serpents [הַנִּחָשִׁים הַשָּׂרָפִים] [*ha'nechashim ha'serafim*] against the Israelites. In that case, Ibn Ezra tells us that *ha'serafim* is an adjective, “fiery.” In Deut. 8:15, where the reading is נִחַשׁ שָׂרָף וְעַקְרָב [*nachas saraf ve'akrav*], most translations similarly have *saraf* as an adjective “fiery” altering the noun “*nachash*,” the serpent. The translator has not identified Rabbi Nachmani’s source, but some rabbis identify *nachas*, *saraf*, and *akrav* as three separate types of *klipot*, viz, a snake, a fiery [serpent], and a scorpion. Perhaps others consider *nachas saraf* (the fiery serpent) to be one *klipa*, *akrav* (the scorpion) to be the second *klipa*, and the parched land to be the third *klipa*.

² The translator has not found an earlier appearance of this term, though it appears in later works, especially Chassidic sefarim, such as Be'er Mayim Chaim (by Chaim Tyrer of Tchernovitz), Agra DeKala (by Tzvi Elimelech Spira of Dinov), Likutei Moharan (by Nachman of Breslov) and Likutei Halacha (by Nathan Sternhartz of Nemirov), Tiferet Shlomo (by Shlomo Hakohen Rabinowicz), and Beit Yaakov (by Yaakov Leiner of Izhbitz). The idea seems to be that *klipot* can enter a person’s mouth, through sins involving speech or eating or drinking. Thus, a spark of holiness can be intermingled with *klipot* inside a person. Through repentance, fasting, and prayer, one can remove the impure from that which is holy. It is likely no mistake that, when written without *nekudot*, the word is spelled the same as the non-Jewish prophet Balaam, who likewise had sparks of holiness, i.e., the Word of G-d, that he contaminated with *klipot* through his decision to agree to curse the Jewish people.

them to the Land of Israel. **Had [the Israelites] merited, they could have removed the sparks in a short time, but because they sinned, they had to linger [in the wilderness] a long time.**

ובנה יובן הפתוב "ויכתב משה את-מוצאייהם למסעייהם" פלומר שמלת "מוצאייהם" רצה לומר יציאה ומציאה, כמו שפירשו על "סיים הם למצאייהם" "למוציא[יה]ם בפה". ואף אם נפרשהו לשון יציאה לבד יהיה מבנין הפעל דהיינו הניצוצות שהוצאו מאותן המקומות היו מוכנים שם מיד וממתינים המסעות.

In this way, we will understand Scripture, “Moses recorded the starting points of their journeys,” as if to say that the word “starting points” [מוצאייהם] [motza'eihem] means to say both “going out” [יציאה] [yetzia] and “finding” [מצאייה] [metzia]. That is, as noted above, the “going out” of the Israelites from one camp to the next led to the weakening of the impure *klipot*, and also led to the “finding” of the sparks of holiness, which they would take with them to the Land of Israel. This is also as [the rabbis] explained on the words, “[My words] are life to him who finds them” (Prov. 4:22), where tractate Eruvin 54a, where Shmuel is recorded as saying, “Do not read: ‘To those who find them [lemotzeihem] [למצאייהם],’ but rather ‘to those who express them [lemotzi'eihem] [למוציאייהם],’ with their mouth, i.e., to those who extract them.” Thus, Israel was not only finding the sparks of holiness, but extracting them from the husks in order to take them with them out of the wilderness.

Even if we explain the word [“starting points”] as the language of “going out” only, it will be in the grammatical structure of *po'al*, which is the active voice, which means that the sparks that went out from these places were prepared there immediately and awaited the journeys of the Israelites who were to collect them.

ואם תומר אם פן לא יהיה לישראל זמן לנוח שהרי מיד שגיעו לאיזה מקום יהיו לוקטים הפל ומיד יהיה להם ליסע למקום אחר בלי מנוחה. על זה אמר הפתוב "ויכתב משה את-מוצאייהם", שהיו ממתינים את המסעות, וזהו "למסעייהם", ולא היה טורח גדול לישראל, שהרי הולכים על פי ה', פלומר שילכו ממסע למסע על פי ה', כמו שפתוב "ואשא אתכם על-כנפי נשרים", על פי מה שאמר ה' ולא יסבלו טורח כלל. וכל זה אם לא היו חוטאים אבל לאחר שתטאו, "ואלה מסעייהם למוצאייהם", שהמסעות היו ממתינים עד שהוציאו הניצוצות שבטורח גדול ובזמן רב היו לוקטים אותם.

Perhaps you will say, “If so, that the Israelites were busy collecting the sparks of holiness, then Israel wouldn’t have time to rest, for as soon as they arrived to any place, they would have to collect all of the sparks of holiness and immediately have to travel to a different place, without rest.” About this, Scripture said, “Moses recorded the starting points,” for [the sparks] were awaiting their journeys, and this is the meaning “of their journeys,” and there was no great trouble for Israel, for they were walking according to G-d, as it is said, they will go from journey to journey according to G-d, as it is written, “and I carried you on the wings of eagles” (Ex. 19:4). This was according to what G-d said, and they would not suffer any trouble at all. But all of this was if they hadn’t sinned, but after they sinned, it says, “and these were their journeys, by starting points.” For the journeys would wait until they removed all the sparks, which was a great exertion, and which took much time to collect them. Thus, the first reference to “starting points” and “journeys” refers to the sparks of holiness, and the second reference to “starting points” and “journeys” refers to the Israelites.

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