**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**MIDRASH ON THE PARASHA**

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Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Brum for the Refua Sheleima of

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**Parashat Tzav:**

**The Lesser Contains the Greater**

### A Miracle in the dimension of space

The Torah describes the moment when Moshe clothes Aharon and his sons in the priestly garments as a symbolic and public event before the eyes of all of Israel:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Take Aharon and his sons with him, and the garments, and the anointing oil, and the bullock of the sin-offering, and the two rams, and the basket of unleavened bread; and assemble (*hakhel*) all the congregation at the door of the tent of meeting.

And Moshe did as the Lord commanded him; and the congregation was assembled (*vatikahel*) at the door of the tent of meeting. And Moshe said to the congregation: This is the thing which the Lord has commanded to be done.

And Moshe brought Aharon and his sons, and washed them with water. And he put upon him the tunic, and girded him with the girdle, and clothed him with the robe, and put the *eifod* upon him, and he girded him with the skillfully woven band of the *eifod*, and bound it to him therewith. And he placed the breastplate upon him; and in the breastplate he put the *Urim* and the *Tumim*. And he set the miter upon his head; and upon the miter, in front, did he set the golden plate, the holy crown; as the Lord commanded Moshe.

And Moshe took the anointing oil, and anointed the tabernacle and all that was therein, and sanctified them. (*Vayikra* 8:1-10)

The Midrash in *Vayikra Rabba* (10, 9) sees this moment as a miracle in the dimension of space:

"And all the congregation was assembled at the door of the tent of meeting" (*Vayikra* 8:3).

Rabbi Elazar said: All of Israel totaled six hundred thousand [adult males], and yet you say: "At the door of the tent of meeting”!

Rather, this is one of the instances in which the lesser contained the greater.

The *derasha* then brings seven more instances “in which the lesser contained the greater”:

Similarly: "Let the waters under the heaven be collected together into one place"(*Bereishit* 1:9).

A person ordinarily empties a full jug into an empty jug. But who can empty a full jug into a full jug? The entire world is full of water, and yet you say: "Let the waters be collected"!

Rather, this is one of the instances in which the lesser contained the greater.

Similarly: "[And the Lord said to Moshe and Aharon:] Take for yourselves your handfuls [of soot of the furnace]" (*Shemot* 9:8).

Rabbi Huna said: The volume of a handful is not the same as the volume of a fistful. The handful's volume is twice that of a fistful. Four handfuls [two from Moshe’s two hands plus two from Aharon’s two hands] are the same as eight fistfuls.

Moshe thus had to hold the equivalent of eight fistfuls, and yet you say: "And let Moshe throw it heavenward" (ibid.), with one throw!

Rather, this is one of the instances in which the lesser contained the greater.

Similarly: "The length of the courtyard shall be a hundred cubits" (*Shemot* 27:18).

Rabbi Yosei bar Rabbi Chalafta said: The length of the courtyard is a hundred cubits, and yet all of Israel stand inside it!

Rather, this is one of the instances in which the lesser contained the greater.

And similarly: "And Moshe and Aharon brought the assembly together (*vayakhilu et ha-kahal*) before the rock" (*Bamidbar* 20:10).

Rabbi Chanan said: It was like [the size of] a sieve, and yet all of Israel stood on it!

Rather, this is one of the instances in which the lesser contained the greater.

And similarly: "And Yehoshua said to the Israelites: Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God" (*Yehoshua* 3:9).

Rabbi Chunya said: He set them between the two staves of the Ark.

Rabbi Huna said: He stood them between the two staves of the Ark.

The Rabbis said: He crowded them in between the two staves of the Ark.

"And Yehoshua said: Hereby you shall know that the living God is among you" (*Yehoshua* 3:10). Because the space between the two staves of the Ark holds [you all], you should know that the living God is among you.

This was also the case in Jerusalem, as we have learned: "They were crowded while standing, but had plenty of room while prostrating."

What is "had plenty of room"?

Rabbi Yishmael bar Unya said in the name of Rabbi Acha: A space of four cubits between each one and the next, and a cubit on each side, so that no one should hear the sound of the prayer of his fellow.

This will also be the case in the future, as it is written: "At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord; and all the nations shall be collected into it" (*Yirmeyahu* 3:17).

Rabbi Yochanan went up to visit Rabbi Chanina. He found him occupied in [the study of] this verse: "At that time they shall call Jerusalem the throne of the Lord."

He said to him: O master, can Jerusalem hold them all?

He said to him: The Holy One, blessed be He, will say: Stretch out, expand, and receive your population. This is what is written: "Enlarge the place of your tent" (*Yeshayahu* 54:2). Why? "For you shall spread abroad on the right hand and on the left; and your seed shall possess the nations, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited" (*Yeshayahu* 54:3).

### The structure of the *derasha*

The *derasha* before us is built as a question and answer, after which are brought additional examples that prove the correctness of the answer. The eight instances "in which the lesser contained the greater" are found throughout Scripture, and across time from the creation of the world to the world of the future. In none of these places does it appear that the *derasha* comes to answer some difficulty in the plain meaning of the text; all of these verses could have been read in their plain sense, without introducing some miraculous occurrence.

Let us examine the verses that are cited in the order that they appear in the *derasha*, in order to understand the words of the Sages.

According to the verses in *Vayikra* 8 cited above, God commands Moshe to gather the people in order that they may see the act of clothing Aharon and his sons in their priestly garments. Even if they all were to stand at the door of the Tent of Meeting, this would be impossible by all natural standards. Only through the creation of a situation "in which the lesser contained the greater" can all of the people see what is happening. Thus, it might be argued that the miraculous "solution" proposed by the *derasha* is not so far from the plain meaning of the text. It is further possible that the wording of the verse: "And assemble all the congregation at the door of the tent of meeting" (*Vayikra* 8:3) is read in its literal sense, that the entire people stand at the door.

The first example that is then brought relates to the creation of the world, The problem with "pouring from a full jug into a full jug" is based, not on the plain sense of the Torah, but on the statement of *Chazal* that prior to the process of setting boundaries which the act of creation involved the world was "water within water."[[1]](#footnote-1)

Thus, the Sages, as it were, create the need for the miracle of an instance "in which the lesser contained the greater." However, even without the image of pouring into a full jug, the Divine statement, "Let the waters be collected into one place" is wondrous.

If so, in the two cases addressed by the *derasha*, the Sages present in their words a miraculous reality that already exists or that is necessitated by the situation, in order to emphasize it.

The third instance (the second example) brought in the *derasha* relates to the plague of boils. Here too, upon reading the *parasha*, we would not notice the miraculous aspect of the act of throwing the soot of the furnace heavenward. The plague of boils, like all of the plagues brought against Egypt, is a distinctly manifest miracle. The *derasha* reveals to us another facet of the miraculous nature of the plague.

In the third example (the fourth instance), the dimensions of the courtyard per se do not point to a miracle. It is only noting the fact that the courtyard cannot contain all of Israel that indicates the need for and existence of a miracle.

The occurrence in the next example parallels the clothing of Aharon and his sons during the seven days of consecration. So too at Mei Meriva, God commands Moshe to gather the people to serve as witnesses to a miracle, and the Torah uses the root *kuf-hei-lamed*:

Take the rod, and assemble (*hakhel*)the congregation, you, and Aharon your brother, and speak you to the rock before their eyes, so that it may give forth its water; and you shall bring forth to them water out of the rock; so you shall give the congregation and their cattle drink. And Moshe took the rod from before the Lord, as He commanded him.

And Moshe and Aharon brought the assembly together (*vayakhilu et ha-kahal*) before the rock, and he said to them: Hear now, rebels: are we to bring you forth water out of this rock? And Moshe lifted up his hand, and smote the rock with his rod twice; and water came forth abundantly, and the congregation drank, and their cattle. (*Bamidbar* 20:8-11)

So too, the wording of the Torah, "And Moshe and Aharon brought the assembly together before the rock," lends itself to the reading that they all stand before the rock, literally an instance "in which the lesser contained the greater."

The next example in the *derasha* relates to the miracle of crossing the Jordan:

And Yehoshua said to the Israelites: Come here, and hear the words of the Lord your God… And it shall come to pass, when the soles of the feet of the priests that bear the ark of the Lord, the Lord of all the earth, shall rest in the waters of the Jordan, that the waters of the Jordan shall be cut off, even the waters that come down from above; and they shall stand in one heap. (*Yehoshua* 3:9-14).

The call to approach the Ark is expounded in the same manner as at Mei Meriva and during the seven days of consecration, that all the people of Israel are miraculously brought into the space between the staves of the Ark.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The miracle in the Temple, that "they were crowded while standing, but had plenty of room while prostrating," is one of the miracles in the Temple that is explicitly mentioned in Tractate *Avot*.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The miracle in the dimension of space has ramifications regarding the possibility of a person communing with God while standing among a multitude of people. In this example, as in the next one, the goal of "in which the lesser contained the greater" shifts slightly and relates not only to a small space containing a mass of people or massive water, but also to expanding limited space beyond its usual boundaries. Thus, the expanse during the time of prostration goes beyond the area while standing, and the Jerusalem of the future, into which all of the nations will be collected, spreads out to the left and to the right.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In light of what has been said, a clear educational goal emerges from the *derasha.* By pointing to events "in which the lesser contained the greater," *Chazal* mean to sharpen our discernment of dimensions of miracles that at first glance are not absorbed in our consciousness. Even in the reality of a miracle, we do not necessarily appreciate its full extent. The *derasha* paves a path for us toward fuller recognition of the revelation of God's work in the world through the exposition of verses from throughout *Tanakh*. The initial layer of plain meaning relates the overall story; a more precise reading of the words themselves and the manner in which the story is told allows us to reach a more precise recognition of His ways. The words of *Tanakh* contain within them the beats of life, and those who content themselves with a general reading or a metaphor will not recognize them.

Now that we have clarified the general thrust of the *derasha*, let us focus on additional insights that emerge from an analysis of the events appearing in it. First, the events mentioned in the *derasha* after the question and answer are presented in their chronological order, from the creation of the world to the future redemption. The creation is characterizedby the retreat and constrictionof the forces of nature, whereas the future redemption is characterized by the holy breaching the boundaries that limit it and expanding beyond them. These two points in time constitute the framework of the subject of the *derasha*, and testify about it as marking a process.

The occurrences mentioned in the *derasha* can be divided into different categories. The plague of boils, the water at Mei Meriva, and the crossing of the Jordan relate to the situation before a miracle. Another category is the Temple, which includes the seven days of consecration, the size of the courtyard and room for prostration. The seven days of consecration and the crossing of the Jordan both relate to the beginning of a new period: the seven days of consecration constitute a period leading up to Aharon and his sons' entry into the priesthood, and Yehoshua stands on the verge of entry into Eretz Israel. All of these revolve around the revelation of God's name in the world — through miracles, through the Temple and through the historical development of the world from one period to the next. The world begins with a revelation that establishes the rules of nature, and it will reach its end with a revelation of God's kingdom by way of the expanding rule of Israel.

### Parallel *Midrashim*

This *derasha* appears also in *Bereishit Rabba* 5, 7 in a different order, as shown in the following table:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *Vayikra Rabba* | *Bereishit Rabba* |
| Clothing Aharon and his sons in the priestly garments during the seven days of consecration | The water at the time of creation |
| The water at the time of creation | Mei Meriva |
| The plague of boils | The plague of boils |
| The size of the *Mishkan*’s courtyard | The size of the *Mishka*n’s courtyard |
| Mei Meriva |  |
| Yehoshua before the crossing of the Jordan | Yehoshua before the crossing of the Jordan |
| Prostrating in Jerusalem | Prostrating in Jerusalem |
| Future expansion of Jerusalem | Future expansion of Jerusalem |

In each work, the *derasha* begins with the matter in question in that particular context.

In *Vayikra Rabba,* the context is the story of clothing Aharon and his sons in the priestly garments and anointing them, whereas in *Bereishit Rabba* the context is the verse: "And God said: Let the waters under the heaven be collected into one place, and let the dry land appear" (*Bereishit* 1:9).

Whereas *Vayikra Rabba* preserves the chronological order of the examples, in *Bereishit Rabba* Mei Meriva appears second, on the heels of the water of creation. The two works are the classic products of the Midrashic enterprise of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel in the aggadic realm up to the fifth century, and there is much common material appearing in both of them.[[5]](#footnote-5)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. See JT *Chagiga* 2:1: “Rabbi Yuda bar Pazi says: At first, the universe was water within water.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Rabbi David Luria in his commentary to *Bereishit Rabba* 5, 7 notes the instances of this root in the sense of gathering in Scripture, in I *Shemuel* 14:38 and in II *Divrei Ha-yamim* 29:31. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Avot* 5:5. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In this *derasha*, to the verse in *Yirmeyahu* that points to ingathering is joined the verse in *Yeshayahu* that points to expansion:

Sing, O barren, you that did not bear, break forth into singing, and cry aloud, you that did not travail; for more are the children of the desolate than the children of the married wife, says the Lord. Enlarge the place of your tent, and let them stretch from the curtains of your habitations, spare not; lengthen your cords, and strengthen your stakes. For you shall spread abroad on the right hand and on the left; and your seed shall possess the nations, and make the desolate cities to be inhabited. (*Yeshayahu* 54:1-3) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The question of the relationship between the sources (did they both draw on a source that has not reached us or is one of them the source of the other?) is a research question that will not be discussed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)