



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת קרח תשס"ח • Parshas Korach 5768

BIG TALKER

At first glance, there exists what appears to be a direct contradiction between the Chumash and the Mishnah, regarding the earth-shattering events of this week's *parshah*.

When Korach and his rebellious following assembled against Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon, a type of 'contest' was arranged to clarify the issue of the priesthood. All involved were to bring offerings, and those whose offering was accepted by Hashem would be designated as the rightful *Kohanim*. As we know, Korach and company lost *big time*. His assembly of 250 men was burned alive, and Korach, together with Dasan and Aviram, descended alive into the netherworld, when the earth split to swallow them.

NEW OR OLD?

Right before Korach's (literal) downfall, Moshe addressed the people, notifying them of the impending disaster:

אם בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא ה' וּפְצֹתָהּ הֲאֲדָמָה אֶת פִּיהָ וּבָלְעָה אֹתָם... וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה וַיִּדְעֶתְם כִּי נֶאֱצוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה אֶת ה': וַיְהִי כְּכַלְתּוֹ לְדַבֵּר... וַתִּפְתַּח הָאֲרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלַע אֹתָם... וַיִּרְדּוּ... חַיִּים שְׂאֵלָה:

“If Hashem will originate a (new) creation, and the ground shall open its mouth and swallow them...and they descend alive into the nether-world, then you shall know that these men have antagonized Hashem.’ And it was, as he finished speaking...and the earth opened its mouth, and swallowed them;...and they descended alive into the nether-world,” (*Bamidbar 16:29-32*).

These verses seem to imply that the opening of the earth's mouth was a new creation that was originated then and there, as Moshe said, “If Hashem will originate a new creation, and the ground shall open its mouth and swallow them.”

Yet, the Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (5:6) seems to state clearly that this was not the case at all. The Mishnah states:

עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְּעֶרֶב שַׁבָּת בֵּין הַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, פִּי הָאֲרֶץ, וּפִי הַבְּאֵר, וּפִי הָאֶתוֹן...

“Ten things were created on *erev Shabbos* at twilight: the mouth of the earth (that swallowed Korach), the mouth of the well (which supplied the Jews with drinking water in the dessert), the mouth of the donkey (who spoke to Bilaam), etc.”

Apparently, the “earth’s mouth” which was to swallow Korach & Company had long been in existence already, having been created at the very beginning of the world. How do we square this idea with Moshe’s characterization of the earth’s mouth as a newly created phenomenon?

PIRSUMEI NISA – BROADCASTING MIRACLES

To resolve this apparent contradiction, the Tosfos Yom Tov in Avos (*ibid.*) advances a novel interpretation, which brings to light a fascinating, if little-known, aspect of this episode.

He begins by identifying the eventual destination of Korach’s band. As quoted above, they descended to the nether-world, usually known as *שְׂאֵל*, but referred to here by the *possuk* as *שְׂאֵלָה*. Based on Rashi in Tehillim (9:18), the Tosfos Yom Tov understands that the extra letter ‘*Hei*’ denotes that they were cast into the absolute nethermost level of Gehinnom.

The Tosfos Yom Tov wonders: Given the fact that this entire awesome spectacle served as a warning and instruction for all of *Klal Yisroel* who witnessed these climactic events, it would seem logical that they should be privy to this aspect as well (that the rebels had reached the very bottom of Gehinnom). How, though, were the rest of the Jewish people able to perceive such a thing?

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Next, the Tosfos Yom Tov focuses in on the wording of the passage, and discovers that two different expressions are used in connection with the opening of the earth's "mouth." In verse 30, when Moshe Rabbeinu predicts their demise, he says "וּפְצְתָהּ" "הָאֲדָמָה אֶת פִּיהָ". Yet in verse 32, when the actual 'ground-breaking' occurs, the Torah uses the term "וַתִּפְתַּח... אֶת פִּיהָ". In both instances, the *Targum* translates them as referring to "opening"; so what is the import of the Torah's usage of these disparate terms?

At this point, things really begin to get interesting. Citing other *pesukim* (such as "וְדַבַּרְתִּי... אֲשֶׁר פָּצוּ שְׂפֵתַי" "וַיִּפְתַּח פִּי"; "My vows... which my lips have uttered and my mouth has spoken," of Tehillim 66:13-14), the Tosfos Yom Tov shows that the term 'פְצָתָהּ' refers to *dibbur* (speech). Hence, when Moshe Rabbeinu referred to the ground opening its mouth – "וּפְצְתָהּ" "הָאֲדָמָה אֶת פִּיהָ" – he was actually referring to the ground speaking! In other words, when describing the actual opening of the earth's mouth to ingest the sinners, the Torah says, "וַתִּפְתַּח... אֶת פִּיהָ". When the Torah says, "וּפְצְתָהּ", it is referring to a different action of the earth's mouth: namely, that it would talk!

What did the earth have to say? The earth itself broadcasted to the Jewish people that the condemned had indeed arrived at their final destination: rock-bottom! It was through the earth's mouth that *Klal Yisroel* was made aware of the ultimate fate of the rebels, bringing the instructive aspect of this whole wondrous episode to its completion.

With this understanding, the aforementioned difficulty is resolved. The Chumash and the Mishnah don't contradict each other, of course; they are merely referring to the different aspects of the earth's "mouth" which displayed themselves during Korach's punishment. The *possuk* (v. 30) which implied that a new opening was to be fashioned right then, was referring to the actual splitting of its surface to engulf the rebels. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos that states that the earth's "mouth" had come into existence already

at the very beginning of Creation, refers to the other aspect of the earth's "mouth": namely, its faculty of speech.

The Tosfos Yom Tov brings support for his interpretation of "*Pi HaAretz*" of the Mishnah from its juxtaposition to the other "mouths" mentioned there: the mouth of Bilaam's donkey, and the mouth of the well. The claim to fame of Bilaam's donkey was that it opened its mouth to speak to its master. The 'mouth of the well' (that supplied *B'nei Yisroel* with its drinking needs in the wilderness) also refers to speaking ability: The Bartenura cites an interpretation that the Mishnah is referring to the "Song of the Well" (mentioned in Bamidbar ch. 21) which was sung by the well itself, as stated there (v. 17): "עֲלֵי בְאֵר" "עֲנֵנוּ לָהּ", "Arise, O Well, intone (song)." It stands to reason, therefore, that the "*Pi HaAretz*", the mouth of the earth, mentioned by the Mishnah is likewise referring to its power of speech.

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