

PARSHA FROM THE SOURCE

פרשה ממקורה

26 Tammuz 5786

פרשת מטות-מסעי תשפ"ו

An accidental murderer is only allowed to leave the city of refuge once the Kohen Gadol dies. What is the connection between these two people?

Rashi Bamidar 35:25

France, 11th c.

"Until the death of the Kohen Gadol" – for he [the Kohen Gadol] comes to cause the Shechinah to rest among Yisrael and to lengthen their days, while the accidental murderer comes to remove the Shechinah and shortens the days of life; it is not fitting for him to be in the presence of the Kohen Gadol.

Another explanation: because it was incumbent upon the Kohen Gadol to pray that this mishap should not occur among Yisrael.

רש"י במדבר לה:כה

רבי שלמה יצחקי

עד מות הכהן הגדול – שהוא בא להשרות שכינה בישראל ולהאריך ימיהם, והרוצח בא לסלק את השכינה ומקצר את ימי החיים, אינו כדאי שיהא לפני כהן גדול.

דבר אחר: לפי שהיה לו לכהן גדול להתפלל שלא תארע תקלה זו בישראל.

Rashi provides two explanations - both focusing on the specific role of the Kohen Gadol. Either the Kohen Gadol's role as someone who brings peace is antithetical to the negligent actions of the accidental murderer, or the Kohen Gadol did not take this role seriously enough - and tragedy happened as a result.

Bechor Shor Bamidbar 35:25

France, 12th c.

"And he shall dwell there until the death of the Kohen Gadol" – According to the peshat, it appears: that this is why it states "until the death of the Kohen Gadol" – for we do not know until when this one who was killed would have lived, had this one not killed him. So we estimate it by [the lifespan of] the Kohen Gadol, who is significant, and it is known that presumably he [the victim] would not have lived longer than a Kohen Gadol, who serves before the Holy One, Blessed Be He. And for as long as this one's years were shortened, that is how long he [the rotzeach] shall be in exile. Therefore the Torah gave him [this measure]. Even if he [the rotzeach] is young and the Kohen Gadol is old, or he is old and the Kohen Gadol is young, the Torah did not distinguish between cases, but rather, however it happens to turn out, it turns out.

בכור שור במדבר לה:כה

ר' יוסף בכור שור

ישוב בה עד מות הכהן הגדול – לפי הפשט נראה: דמשום הכי נקט עד מות הכהן הגדול, ואין אנו יודעין עד מתי הוא חי זה הנהרג, אם לא שהרגו זה. ומשערינן ליה בכהן גדול שהוא חשוב, וידוע דמסתמא לא היה חי יותר מכהן גדול שהוא משמש לפני הקב"ה. וכזמן שקיצר שניו של זה יהיה בגלות, ולכך נתנה תורה לו ויקיירא בלעז בכהן גדול. ואפילו הוא בחור, וכהן גדול זקן, או הוא זקן, וכהן גדול בחור, לא חלקה תורה, אלא כי היכי דאיתרמי איתרמי.

The Bechor Shor provides an intriguing theory, that we are simply attempting to match the accidental murderer's sentence to the theoretical lifespan of the victim - with the life of the Kohen Gadol being a convenient benchmark.

Abarbanel Bamidbar 35:24

Spain, 15th c.

And he said that he shall dwell there until the death of the Kohen Gadol, because the Kohen Gadol was a minister and a great one among Yisrael, and holy unto his G-d, and at his death all the people would tremble, and the living would take to heart that the days of man are like a passing shadow – and why should he not remove from his thoughts vengeance for the blood of his relative and [the desire] to cut off through murders and killings, when tomorrow the go'el hadam himself will also be carried to the grave? And therefore his heart and the seething of his blood will grow quiet, and he will be comforted and forget his distress, and his zealotry will subside. And therefore it says "until the death of the Kohen Gadol," who is the great one through whom the raging heart of the go'el hadam will grow quiet. And Chazal said [it is] because he [the Kohen Gadol] atones for Yisrael, and it was incumbent upon him to seek mercy on behalf of the people of his generation, and he did not seek it.

אברבנאל במדבר לה:כד

דון יצחק אברבנאל

ואמר שישב בה עד מות הכהן גדול לפי שהכהן גדול היה שר וגדול בישראל וקדוש לאלהיו ובמותו כל העם יחד והחי יתן אל לבו כי ימי האדם בצל עולם ולמה לא יסיר מרעיוני נקמת דם קרובו ולהכרית ברציחות ובהריגות ומחר גם גואל הדם לקבר יובל ולכן ישקוט לבבו ורתיחת דמו ויתנחם וישכח צרתו וסרה קנאתו ועל כן אמר עד מות הכהן הגדול שהוא הגדול אשר בו תשקוט המיית לבב גואל הדם. וחז"ל אמרו מפני שהוא מכפר על ישראל והיה לו לבקש רחמים על בני דורו ולא בקש.

The Abarbanel suggests that the Kohen Gadol's passing has less to do with the accidental murderer, and more about quelling the flames of revenge that the relatives of the victims may have.

Questions for Reflection:

1. According to the second approach given by Rashi, it seems that we are attempting to punish/blame the Kohen Gadol for the tragedy that took place. How does making the accidental murderer wait for the Kohen Gadol to die act as a punishment to the Kohen Gadol?
2. According to the Abarbanel, the death of the Kohen Gadol was meant to be a wake-up call for the victim's family. What events that happen in the world might be a similar signal to us - and how can we make sure we're listening to them?

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Laura Marder has spent over 20 years teaching and working in Jewish education and outreach, including through her work with the L'Chaim Center. She has a deep passion for helping Jewish women learn, grow, and connect. She trains teachers and community leaders in the art of group learning and chabura facilitation, helping create spaces that are thoughtful, meaningful, and alive with passionate Torah exchange. With an MSW and her work as an interior decorator, Laura brings both depth and creativity to the many roles she fills. Most importantly, she is a grateful wife and mother to her beloved crew.

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