

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף קט: - קי.

"ויקח [קרח]" -
אמר ריש לקיש: שלקח מקח רע לעצמו.
"קרח" - שנעשה קרח בשראלי;
"בן יצהר" - בן שהרתיח עליו את כל העולם כזהרים;
"בן קהת" - בן שהקהה שיני מולידיו;
"בן לוי" - בן שנעשה לוי בגיהנם.
ולחשוב נמי בן יעקב - בן שעקב עצמו לגיהנם!
אמר רב שמואל בר רב יצחק: יעקב בקש רחמים על עצמו,
שנאמר, בסדום אל תבא נפשי בקהלם אל תחד כבדי" -
"בסדום אל תבא נפשי" - אלו מרגלים; "בקהלם אל תחד כבדי" - זה עדת קרח.
"דתן" - שעבר על דת אל,
"אבירם" - שאיבר עצמו [שהעביר לבו] מעשות תשובה.
ואון - שישב באניות,
פלת - שנעשו לו פלאות,
בן ראובן - בן שראה והבין.
אמר רב: און בן פלת אשתו הצילתו.
אמרה ליה: מאי נפקא לך מינה? אי מר רבה - אנת תלמידא, ואי מר רבה - אנת תלמידא!
אמר לה: מאי אעביד? הואי בעצה, ואשתבעי לי בהדיה!
אמרה ליה: ידענא דכולה כנישתא קדישתא נינהו, דכתיב "כי כל העדה כלם קדשים."
אמרה ליה: תוב, דאנא מצילנא לך.
אשקיתיה חמרא, ואריתיה, ואגניתיה גואי.
אותבה על בבא, וסותרתה למזיה. כל דאתא חזיה, הדר.
אדהכי והכי אבלעו להו.

איתתיה דקרח אמרה ליה: חזי מאי קעביד משה! איהו הוה מלכא, לאחווה שוויה כהנא רבא, לבני אחוהי שוינהו סגני דכהנא! אי אתיא תרומה - אמר תיהוי לכהן; אי אתו מעשר דשקילתו אתון - אמר הבו חד מעשרה לכהן; ועוד דגייז ליה למזייכו ומיטלל לכו כי כופתא, עינא יהב במזייכו.
אמר לה: הא איהו נמי קא עביד!
אמרה ליה: כיון דכולהו רבואת ידידיה, אמר איהו נמי "תמת נפשי עם פלשתים". ועוד: דקאמר לכו עבדיתו תכלתא, אי סלקא דעתך תכלתא חשיבא [מצוה] - אפיק גלימי דתכלתא וכסינהו לכולהו מתיבתך!
היינו דכתיב: (משלי י"ד) "חכמות נשים בנתה ביתה" - זו אשתו של און בן פלת; "ואולת בידה תהרסנה" - זו אשתו של קרח.

Said Rav: On ben Pelet was saved by his wife.

She said to him: What difference does it make to you? If this one is the master, you are the student, and if that one is the master, you are the student!

He said to her: What should I do? I was part of the conspiracy, and I swore to them!

She said: I know that the entire community is holy, as Scripture says "for the entire community is holy".

She said: Sit, for I will say you.

She gave him wine and got him drunk and put him to bed.

She sat at the doorway and let her hair down. Everyone who came saw her and turned around.

Eventually the rest were swallowed up by the earth.

In haste – I hope to go back to the more fully developed format in two weeks, when SBM is well under way.

Some time ago I read a very interesting article – I will try to remember by whom – which argued that many Midrashic narrative expansions were originally framed simply as retellings, and the presentation form of connecting them to specific textual issues is a later development. This dovetails with my own claim that Midrash must be read as holistic interpretation of the text. The specific textual connections are often just playful mnemonics, but this doesn't mean that the interpretation is eisegetic, consciously or otherwise. But it fits as well or better with the claim, possibly made by James Kugel in the name of Torah sheb'al peh, that many of these narrative expansions are historically indivisible from the text, i.e. that these stories preexisted or were given over simultaneously with the text.

This week's story could be read simply as an imaginative expansion of the verse from Proverbs that ends the entire Talmudic unit: "the wisdom of women built her house, but crookedness in her hand will destroy it". The darshan tried to think of examples in which otherwise indistinguishable men had opposite fates, and came up with Korach and On. Such a reading would, to my mind, be absurd. Leave aside the lost opportunity of "The wisdom of (plural) women built her (singular) house" (Bamidbar Rabbah solves this by having On's daughter join her mother in the doorway hair display) – this presupposes that On's failure to die in the revolt was known.

Now perhaps it was known - On's absence after the opening verse is quite striking. But almost as striking is that this seems to be the only story that explains it! Why are there not multiple creative explanations for On's disappearance – he got too involved in the sugya he was learning, or he was called to the other door to give tzedakah, etc.?

It seems more likely to me that this story was a given for Jewish interpreters of Tanakh. With that given, perhaps someone, inspired by Mishlei, created the parallel story of Korach's wife, which seems to take preexisting rationales of the revolt and simply blame them on her.

But what is the meaning of the story? On the surface it is viciously satirical – these conspirators against G-d nonetheless cannot bear the sight of a woman's hair, presumably lest it distract them from their holy thoughts. But a postmodernist would have to suggest that it also indicates ambivalence, a genuine recognition of the religious sincerity of the rebels. Note that Mrs. On cites as authoritative Korach's claim that the whole community is holy.

This needs to be placed in the context of On's plea that he is bound by his oath. What emerges is that Mrs. On acts, apparently, only out of self-interest. On himself had acted in mistaken self-interest, but would continue out of honor. Korach and company are acting out of a genuine if mistaken sense of holiness. Yet Mrs. On is the heroine!

If the expansion were mere playful eisegesis, we might dismiss this semi-paradox as the accidental product of a creative entertainment. But if it is an essential part of the story, we need to consider what it tells us about the story as a whole.

Shabbat Shalom

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