

BOOK REVIEW

The Ethics of Numbers by Rabbi Dr. Abba Engelberg. Kodesh Press, 2020. 357 pages. Reviewed by: Yonatan Horovitz

Both those educated in biblical literature with a knowledge of Oral Law and those who are less familiar with these disciplines will find interest in this book, the fourth volume of Rabbi Dr. Engelberg's series on the Pentateuch. The various chapters take the reader on a journey through the Book of Numbers, though mostly through the eyes of the Talmudic scholars and the Midrashic works. Engelberg relates to some of the main episodes of Numbers such as the sin of the spies and the rebellion of Korach. Using a plethora of sources, this work often attempts to connect the ideas not only to timeless ethical lessons as its title would suggest, but also to contemporary dilemmas. An example of this can be found on page 24 with regards the lineage of various peoples scattered around the work who claim to be descendants of the tribe of Dan.

In his discussion of the nazirite, Engelberg cites various sources which relate to the place of worldly pleasures in Jewish tradition. This is an important subject and one which similar works often try to avoid. We might have expected this line to continue within the question raised about the status of the marriage of Moses and Tziporah but the author left that to our imagination.

A further notion which was refreshing was that found in the section on *Chukat*. Here the author compares the three siblings, Moses, Aaron and Miriam, and contrasts their different leadership skills. He claims, with the use of various Midrashim, that each contributed a unique attribute which allowed for a three pronged approach to shepherding the Israelites in the wilderness.

This book, however, while dealing with points of interest, could benefit from a clearer sense of methodology in its thought process. On the one hand, the reader may find themselves bewildered by the tangents along which the author takes us and on the other we find that certain Midrashic works are quoted when the more obvious explanations are ignored.

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For instance, in the section discussing the fact that a non-circumcised male cannot partake of the Pesach offering, it is correctly pointed out that the non-compliance with either of these commandments results in the severe punishment of *karet*, excommunication. The author goes to great lengths to explain the connection between the two and while his argument is quite compelling, we could suggest a simpler solution. These two commandments commemorate the two covenants made between The Almighty and Abraham back in the book of Genesis, the *brit bein habetarim* – covenant between the pieces – which foretells of the enslavement and subsequent redemption from Egypt and *brit milah* which centers around the rite of circumcision. Failure to comply with either of these commandments denotes a desire to separate oneself from the children of Abraham and therefore the sinner is in a certain manner self-excommunicated. Furthermore, by making the fulfillment of one dependent on the other, the Torah is emphasizing the necessity of identifying with both these covenants.

In the discussion about Pinchas' act of religious zealotry (p. 209), the author quotes the Talmud which states that Pinchas claimed to have been inspired to action by a lesson taught to him by Moses on his descent from Mount Sinai: "He who cohabits with a heathen woman, zealots (may) attack them." Once again in interpreting this statement the author presents an imaginative, though well sourced, thought process. We humbly suggest that based on the well-known Biblical parallel between adultery and idolatry, one mentioned earlier in the same chapter of the book, the Midrash is referring to a specific event. On his descent from Mount Sinai Moses finds the nation in the midst of the sin of the golden calf. After destroying the said calf, Moses then turns to the nation with the call: "Who is on the Lord's side, let him come to me". Members of Levite tribe answer his call and Moses tells them, *Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin* (Exodus 32:26-27). This shows Moses acting with zealotry in order to purge the sinners from the nation's midst. This could well be the "lesson" to which the above mentioned passage in the Talmud refers. (See this article by Prof. Yonatan Grossman for a more detailed analysis on the parallel between these two events: <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/zeal-moshe-nadav-and-avihu-and-pinchas>)

