

Leviticus Rabbah 31:4

Commentary on Leviticus 24:2
Translation and commentary from J. Neusner
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1

- A. Bar Qappara commenced [his discourse by citing the following verse of Scripture:] *For you light my lamp* (Ps. 18:29).
- B. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to this man, Your lamp is in my hand, and will my lamp be in your hand?
- C. Your lamp is my hand: *The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord* (Prov. 20:27).
- D. Will my lamp be in your hand? *That a light may be kept burning continually* (Lev. 24:2).
- E. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, If you light my lamp, lo, I shall light your lamp.
- F. *Command the people of Israel.* (Lev. 24:2).

2

- A. *Your head (RtSK ראשך) crowns you like Carmel, [and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses]* (Song 7:6).
- B. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, The least (RS) among you are as precious to me as Elijah, who came up to the top (R'S ראש) of Mount Carmel.
- C. That is in line with the following verse of Scripture: And Elijah went up to the top (R'S ראש) of Carmel and bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees (I Kings 18:42).
- D. Why did he put his face between his knees? He said before the Holy One, blessed be He, Lord of the world, if we do not have [sufficient] merit, [then at least] gaze upon the mark of the covenant. (Circumcision is the sign of the covenant)
- E. *And your flowing (DLT דלת) locks are like purple* (Song 7:6):
- F. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, The poorest (DL דל) among you are as precious to me as David.
- G. That is in line with the following verse of Scripture: *And he who stumbles among them on that day shall be like David* (Zech. 12:8).
- H. And some say [that the poorest] are as precious as Daniel, concerning whom it is written, *And he cloaked Daniel in purple* (Dan. 5:29).
- I. *The king is held captive in the tresses* (Song 7:6):
- J. The king refers to the King of kings of kings, for it is written, *The Lord is king, clothed in majesty* (Ps. 93:1).

3

- A. *Captive in the tresses* (RHTYM רהטים) (Song 7:6): For God bound himself by an oath that he would bring his Presence to rest among the rafters (RHT רהט) of our father, Jacob.
- B. On account of whose merit [will this take place]?
- C. R. Abba bar Kahana and R. Levi:
- D. R. Abba bar Kahana said, It is on account of the merit of Abraham, for it is

written, *To the herd did Abraham run* (Gen. 18:7).

- E. Levi said, It was on account of the merit of Jacob, for it is written concerning him, *And he set the rods, which he had peeled, over against the flocks in the gutters* (RHTYM רהטים) (Gen. 30:38).

4

- A. Said R. Berekhiah, King refers to Moses, concerning whom it is written, *And there will be a king in Jeshurun* (Deut. 33:5).
B. *Captive in the tresses* [refers to Moses,] for the Holy One, blessed be He, made a decree concerning [Moses] that he may not enter the Land of Israel. [So he was held captive.]
C. On what account? On account of the running (RHTYM רהטים) that took place at the Water of Rebellion. That is in line with the following verse of Scripture: *It is the Water of Rebellion* (Num. 20:8).

5

- A. R. Judah compared the matter (of Moses at Num. 20:8) in a parable: To what is the matter likened? To a king who made a decree, saying, Whoever gathers and eats figs of the Seventh Year will be made to march around the parade field. A woman, daughter of good and distinguished family, went and gathered and ate figs of the Seventh Year. They began to parade her about the parade field [in disgrace]. She cried out, saying to the king, By your grace, My Lord, O king, hang these figs around my neck, so that people won't say, It appears that she is guilty of sexual depravity or witchcraft. When people see the dates around my neck, they will know that it is on their account that I am paraded about in disgrace.
B. So said Moses before the Holy One, blessed be he, Write in your Torah the reason that I am not going to enter the Land of Israel, so that the Israelites will not say, It would appear that Moses forged the Torah, or said something in it that he had not been commanded.
C. Said to him the Holy One, blessed be He, By your life! I shall write it down so that people will know that it was only on account of the affair at the Water.
D. That is in line with the following verse of Scripture: *Because you rebelled against my commandment in the wilderness of Zin* (Num. 27:14).

6

- A. R. Simeon compared the matter in a parable: To what is the matter likened? To a king who was traveling on the road, with his son with him in the chariot. When they came to a narrow spot, the coach turned over on his son. The son's eye was blinded, his hand cut off, and his leg broken. Whenever the king came near that spot, he would call the tragedy to mind, saying Woe is me! This is where my son was injured, here his eye was blinded, here his hand was cut off, here his leg was broken.
B. So the Holy One, blessed be He, on three separate occasions makes mention in his Torah of the waters of rebellion, as if to say, This is where I killed Moses, this is where I killed Aaron, this is where I killed Miriam.

- C. That is in line with the following verse of Scripture: *There judges are thrown down by the sides of the rock, they heard my words, that they are sweet* (Ps. 141:6).

7

- A. R. Nahman said, *The king* [of Song 7:6] refers to Moses, for it is written, *And there will be a king in Jeshurun* [Deut. 33:5] .
- B. Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to Moses, I appointed you king over Israel. The way of acting as king is to make a decree and have others carry it out. So you will make a decree and the Israelites will carry it out: *Command the people of Israel* (Lev. 24:2).

God does offer a fair exchange, symbolized by the commandment to keep a lamp burning in the sanctuary. The clear understanding, of course, is that God dwells in the sanctuary and requires the light continually. This is transformed into a paradox. The relevant point of Nos. 2- 7 is reached only at the very end, the stress being on Moses to issue a command. That is the goal of the compositor of the whole, since the intersecting verse concludes with a reference to a king. But, as is clear, the intersecting verse is carefully worked out, clause by clause, wholly in its own terms. The intersecting verse for Nos. 2- 7, Song 7:5, contains three elements, and, as we see, there is a systematic interpretation of them, Nos. 2-3, Elijah, 4-6, Moses, and 7, Moses. The inserted materials, Nos. 5 and 6, amplify the matter of the Water of Rebellion but play no role in the larger construction. Then, No.7 brings us to the point at which the intersecting verse reaches the base verse.