FUCHSBERG JERUSALEM CENTER STUDY PRAY EXPLORE

Parashah:	Shlach
Read On:	June 21, 2025 | 25 Sivan 5785
Torah:	Numbers 13:1–15:41
Triennial:	Numbers 15:8–41
Haftorah:	Joshua 2:1–24

TORAH SPARKS

RISING

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt
Dvar Parashah

In Parashat Shlach, God delivers a decree as final as it is devastating. After the people refuse to enter the land, after they weep through the night and demand a return to Egypt, God declares:
"בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִפְּלוּ פִגְרֵיכֶם" — "In this wilderness, your carcasses shall fall" (Numbers 14:29).

An entire generation will die in the desert. They will not cross over. They will not see the land they were promised.

The Torah offers no stories of their deaths. We do not hear their names. We are not told where they fell or how they were mourned. They disappear from the narrative, unnamed and unmarked.

But our tradition preserves a different story. Rashi, in his commentary on *Taanit 30b:12*, brings their final years into focus with startling intimacy:

> "All forty years that they were in the wilderness, every Erev Tisha B'Av, a herald would go out and proclaim: 'Go and dig!' And each person would dig a grave and lie in it, thinking perhaps this year they would die. In the morning, a call would go out: 'Separate the living from the dead,' and those who still lived would rise and walk away. In the fortieth year, they did the same, but in the morning everyone stood up alive. They suspected a mistake in the calendar, and returned to their graves the next night, and the next, until the fifteenth of Av. When they saw the full moon and realized no one had died, they knew the decree had ended. And they made that day into a festival."

It is a haunting ritual, year after year, lying down in the dust, not knowing whether you would rise. But it is also deeply brave. They faced the decree not in rebellion but in rhythm. They made meaning of their mortality.

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They accepted the burden of transition with open eyes, squared shoulders, and shovels in hand. They lay down each night not because they had given up, but because they refused to. They met fear with discipline. They sanctified the waiting. They gave form to a liminal life that might otherwise have crumbled under its own uncertainty.

And then, one year, the pattern broke. They rose. Not because of some dramatic announcement or divine sign, but because they were still breathing. Because no one was missing. Because the moon was full and the silence had shifted.

That is the year the decree ends. Not with spectacle, but with presence.

Psalm 90, the only psalm attributed to Moses, seems to speak from within that very moment:

"You return man to dust…
You sweep them away as in sleep…
Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

This psalm is not a celebration of triumph. It is a meditation on time, on vulnerability, on the quiet power of remaining steadfast. It is the voice of someone who has counted years by funerals and still chooses to ask for wisdom. And it echoes the lives of those who made it to the end of the wilderness—not because they won, but because they endured.

Perhaps that is the final gift of the wilderness generation: not the land they were denied, but the courage they displayed in meeting each night with open eyes and unshaken dignity. They did not die as victims. They lived as witnesses. They turned the decree into discipline, the waiting into wisdom. They lay down with the knowledge that they might not rise, and when they did, they turned that rising into something sacred.

Each year, they faced death not in chaos but in community. They practiced grief not as despair, but as devotion. And in their final year, when they rose and found the night unchanged and yet somehow new, they understood what it meant to live with fear and still make space for joy.

They were not a generation lost. They were a generation that held the line, forty years in the breach, so that the next could cross over.

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And so they rose not only because the decree had lifted, but because they had lifted it with their faithfulness, their steadiness, their refusal to abandon each other in the dark.

They teach us not only that we can survive what we do not choose, but that by rising again and again, we prepare the ground for something more whole to follow.

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SOMETHING LACKLUSTER IN THE VALLEY OF THE CLUSTER

Jonathan Lipnick

Exploring the Parashah

*In this video series, we will explore an often neglected aspect of the parashah: geography. Each week we will focus on a physical location mentioned in the parashah and examine its historical significance. Of course not every parashah contains a narrative situated in a place; for these weeks we will select a word from the parashah that relates to the material culture of ancient Israel.

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INDIVIDUAL AND NATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Rabbi Joshua Kulp
Midrash and the Parashah

Bemidbar 15 and Vayikra 4 provide us with the perfect opportunity to see how rabbis reconcile passages from different books of the Torah and at the same time read their interpretive vision into the text. Both passages deal with accidental sins and how they are atoned for through sacrifice. Both passages also distinguish between a sin committed by the entire nation and one committed by an individual. I have lined them up here for easier comparison. The verses here deal with the case of a "national transgression."

Leviticus 4:13-14	Bemidbar 15:24
וְאִם כָּל־עֲדַת יִשְׂרָאֵל יִשְׁגּוּ וְנֶעְלַם דָּבָר מֵעֵינֵי הַקָּהָל וְעָשׂוּ אַחַת מִכָּל־מִצְוֹת יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תֵעָשֶׂינָה וְאָשֵׁמוּ: וְנוֹדְעָה הַחַטָּאת אֲשֶׁר חָטְאוּ עָלֶיהָ וְהִקְרִיבוּ הַקָּהָל פַּר בֶּן־בָּקָר לְחַטָּאת וְהֵבִיאוּ אֹתוֹ לִפְנֵי אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד: If all the congregation of Israel has erred and the matter escapes the notice of the congregation, so that they do **any of the things** which by God's commandments ought not to be done, and they realize guilt—when the sin through which they incurred guilt becomes known, the congregation shall offer a **bull of the herd** as a sin offering, and bring it before the Tent of Meeting.	וְהָיָה אִם מֵעֵינֵי הָעֵדָה נֶעֶשְׂתָה לִשְׁגָגָה וְעָשׂוּ כָּל־הָעֵדָה פַּר בֶּן־בָּקָר אֶחָד לְעֹלָה לְרֵיחַ נִיחֹחַ לַיהוָה וּמִנְחָתוֹ וְנִסְכּוֹ כַּמִּשְׁפָּט וּשְׂעִיר־עִזִּים אֶחָד לְחַטָּת: If this was done unwittingly, through the inadvertence of the community, the community leaders shall present **one bull of the herd** as a burnt offering of pleasing odor to God, with its proper meal offering and libation, and **one he-goat** as a sin offering.

Both passages deal with the same subject—an inadvertent transgression performed by the entire nation. There are three main problems the rabbis need to address in these two passages:

1. Why would the Torah teach the same thing twice?

2. Why are the sacrifices slightly different in each case (bull in Vayikra, bull and goat in Bemidbar)?
3. How does it come to be that the entire congregation transgresses? How do these passages differ from the case of individual sins that are found later in both Vayikra and Bemidbar?

The first two of these questions are classic examples of rabbinic midrashic inquiry, intended to resolve tensions that arise when certain topics are presented slightly differently in various books of the Torah. While modern critical scholars attribute such discrepancies to the Torah's composition from multiple "documents," the rabbis approach the text as a unified whole. For them, the Torah is a single, integral work—"perfect" in the sense that it does not contradict itself.

To solve both issues, Sifre Bemidbar 111 states that the verses from Bemidbar refer to idol worship:

'And if you shall err and not do'—idolatry was included among all the commandments for which the community brings a bull. Yet Scripture singles it out from the general category in order to be stricter with it (and to assign it a fixed ruling), that the community should bring for it a bull as a burnt offering and a goat as a sin offering. Therefore, this section was stated."	וְכִי תִשְׁגּוּ וְלֹא תַעֲשׂוּ – עֲבוֹדָה זָרָה הָיְתָה בִּכְלַל כָּל הַמִּצְוֹות שֶׁהַצִּבּוּר מֵבִיאִין עָלֶיהָ פַּר, וְהֵרִי הַכָּתוּב מוֹצִיאָהּ מִכְּלָלָהּ לְהַחְמִיר עָלֶיהָ (וְלָדוּן בִּקְבוּעָה), שֶׁיְּהֵא הַצִּבּוּר מֵבִיאִין עָלֶיהָ פַּר לְעוֹלָה וְשָׂעִיר לְחַטָּאת – לְכָךְ נֶאֱמְרָה פָּרָשָׁה זו.

The midrash immediately interprets Bemidbar as referring to the sin of idolatry, which, according to this reading, is singled out and treated more stringently than the other sins, which are referred to in Leviticus. For all other transgressions, the community brings one offering of a bull; for idolatry, the community brings a bull and an additional sin offering. This solves both problems 1 and 2 and accords with the hierarchy of sins. Bemidbar is not a repeat of Vayikra, for it refers to a different transgression. The discrepancy between the sacrifices is explained—for the sin of idol worship, two sacrifices are brought. For all other sins, only one. And the midrash expresses well the widespread rabbinic notion, one clearly reflected in the Torah as well, that idolatry is the root of all transgression.

Finally, I want to address how the rabbis understand what Vayikra means when it states, "If all the congregation of Israel has erred and the matter escapes the notice of the congregation." The following is the first mishnah of Tractate Horayot:

If the court ruled that one of the commandments mentioned in the Torah may be transgressed, and an individual proceeded and acted through error in accordance with their ruling, whether they acted and he acted with them or they acted and he acted after them or even if they did not act and he acted, he is exempt, because he relied on the court.	הוֹרוּ בֵּית דִּין לַעֲבֹר עַל אַחַת מִכָּל מִצְוֹת הָאֲמוּרוֹת בַּתּוֹרָה, וְהָלַךְ הַיָּחִיד וְעָשָׂה שׁוֹגֵג עַל פִּיהֶם, בֵּין שֶׁעָשׂוּ וְעָשָׂה עִמָּהֶן, בֵּין שֶׁעָשׂוּ וְעָשָׂה אַחֲרֵיהֶן, בֵּין שֶׁלֹּא עָשׂוּ וְעָשָׂה, פָּטוּר, מִפְּנֵי שֶׁתָּלָה בְּבֵית דִּין.

The rabbis read Leviticus 4:13-14 and Bemidbar 15:24 as referring to a case where the court issued an errant ruling and an individual followed that ruling. The individual is exempt from an individual sacrifice "because he relied on the court." To atone for this sin, the court will bring a collective sacrifice, and the individual will be atoned through their offering. This interpretation offers a deep vision both for the responsibility of the judicial system and the culpability of the individual. A court that issues an errant ruling bears the stain of the individuals who perform the act—it is not, for instance, the eating of a forbidden piece of meat that is in itself a transgression.

So then what does it mean for an individual to transgress unwittingly, a category referred to in both Vayikra and Bemidbar? The central idea is that for one to sin incidentally, they must first "know" that the act is prohibited but then somehow accidentally transgress it. For instance, they ate a piece of meat thinking it was permitted and then found out it was not, or they lit a candle thinking it was Friday and it was actually Shabbat. In both cases, the person "knew" the law, but then accidentally transgressed it. To the rabbis, a "transgression" is not merely a physical act. It is rather a case where one's knowledge of what is right and wrong does not accord with how one acts, albeit accidentally. Underneath the technical aspects of this midrash lies the core rabbinic doctrines of individual and national responsibility.