

TORAH SPARKS

BURYING THE DEAD AND CHOOSING LIFE

Bex Stern-Rosenblatt
Dvar Parashah

At the end of Numbers, we stand at the edge of the land. The long journey through the wilderness is almost over. The generation of the Exodus has died out. Miriam is gone. Aaron is gone. Moses stands alone, waiting for his death. And the Torah pauses, unexpectedly and tenderly, to unspool **the list** of all the places we stopped along the way: “These are the journeyings of the Israelites who came out of the land of Egypt by their battalions, in the hand of Moses and Aaron.”

It is a memory map, a grave map, a reckoning with the fact that we move forward only because we have buried our dead. This journey was not just a procession from one land to another; it was a slow, aching shedding of a generation, a nation of survivors leaving a trail of bones across the wilderness.

And then, suddenly, the Torah breaks the rhythm, opening a **window** back onto Egypt:

וּמִצְרַיִם מִקְבְּרִים אֶת אֲשֶׁר הָכָה יְהוָה בָּם כָּל־בְּכוֹר וּבְאֵלֵיהֶם עָשָׂה יְהוָה שְׁפָטִים
“And the Egyptians were burying all the firstborn that the LORD had struck down among them, and the LORD had dealt punishment to their gods.”

The Torah didn’t need to tell us this here. We know the Exodus story. We know the firstborn died, that Egypt was crushed. But here, at the edge of the land, the text insists we look back and see **them**, the Egyptians, still bent over their graves.

Why were we able to leave? The **verse** tells us: we departed “לְעֵינֵי כָל מִצְרַיִם,” in the sight of all Egypt. They saw us fleeing, but they did not stop us. Why? Because they were too busy burying their dead. They were too consumed by their own grief to hold onto their slaves. Their hands were full of bodies. Their eyes were blurred with tears. And so we slipped free.

But Egypt could not stop. With the firstborn dead, with the grief unprocessed, they rushed forward into the sea, into their own grave. They chased us into the waters, unpausing, ungrieving, unrelenting, and were swallowed up. Rising from the graveside of their firstborns, Egypt ran forward into its own grave.

But we—we waited. For forty years, we waited. We buried. We watched the wilderness generation fall. We dug graves at the edge of the camp. We lay down at night, not knowing who would rise in the morning. We waited until every last member of the old generation was gone, until the wilderness had claimed its due. And only now, when we have buried our dead, can we prepare to enter the land.

But the Torah does not end the journey with graves alone. Instead, it gives us a surprising, even radical **command**: make cities of refuge.

וְהָקִרְיתֶם לָכֶם עָרִים עָרֵי מִקְלָט תִּהְיֶינָה לָכֶם וְגַם שָׂמָּה רֹצֵחַ מִכָּה-נִפְּשׁ בְּשָׁגָגָה

“You shall set out for yourselves towns, towns of asylum you shall have, and a murderer may flee there, one who strikes down a person in errance”

The land we are about to enter will not be a land without killing. There will be blood, there will be accidents, there will be vengeance-seekers. But the Torah demands that we interrupt the cycle. We must set aside places where death does not lead to more death, where grief does not spill over into revenge. These עֲרֵי מִקְלָט, cities of refuge, are anti-graveyards. They are the Torah’s way of saying: not every death needs to make another grave.

Moses, at the end of his life, becomes the figure of divine vengeance, going beyond even God’s command. God says, *avenge the Israelites*. Moses says, *avenge God*. God says, *strike Midian*. Moses says, *annihilate Midian*. And then Moses dies. His life closes with an act of vengeance so overwhelming, so godlike, that it costs him his own crossing.

And we, left behind, are told: no more. Build refuge. Hold life back from death. Grieve and then rise up.

We stand at the Jordan not only with a list of stops, but with a list of graves. We carry Egypt’s dead, Midian’s dead, our own dead. We carry the knowledge that we survived because others

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Read On:	July 26, 2025 1 Av 5785
Torah:	Numbers 30:2–36:13
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Haftarah:	Jeremiah 2:4–28; 3:4

were too busy burying their children to stop us and that when we took vengeance into our own hands, we made others bury theirs.

The Torah leaves us with this tension: we are the people who cross into the land only after burying our dead, only after watching others bury theirs. And as we enter, we are commanded not to be Egypt, not to be caught in the cycle of vengeance until we drown ourselves. We are commanded not even to be Moses, not to take vengeance so deeply into our bones that it becomes our last act. We are commanded to be something else: a people who builds places where death stops.

The cities of refuge are the Torah's fierce, trembling hope: that we can carry memory without multiplying graves, that we can carry grief without making it a weapon, that we can carry our dead—and still choose life.

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THE ASCENT OF THE SCORPIONS

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.