

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Post of Milton Gottesman Jewish Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Chukat
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פרשת חקת
י' בתמוז תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 19:1-22:1

In this *parasha*, Hashem instructs Moshe and Aaron regarding the *parah adumah* (red heifer); Miriam dies; to bring forth water, Moshe hits a rock rather than speaking to it; Aharon dies.

An odd verse appears in chapter 21, as the Torah is recounting the places that the Bnei Yisrael encamped until they had water. Says verse 14: “עַל-כֵּן, וַיֹּאמֶר, בְּסִפְרִי, מִלְחַמַּת ה' : – אֶת-וְהֵב בְּסוּפָה, וְאֶת-הַנְּחָלִים אֲרָנוֹן. Therefore it is said in the book of the wars of Hashem: Vahev in Suphah, and the valleys of Arnon...”

What is this “book of the wars of Hashem”? Have you ever come across or even heard of such a book? The commentators struggle with this question, and one of the most cogent explanations is given by Ibn Ezra [12th Century Spain]:

ספר היה בפני עצמו ושם כתוב מלחמות ה' בעבור יריאיו ויתכן שהיה מימות אברהם כי ספרים רבים אבדו ואינם נמצאים אצלנו כדברי נתן ועדו ודברי הימים למלכי ישראל ושירות שלמה ומשלו

This was a self-standing book and in it were written the wars of God for those who fear Hashem. It is possible that it dates back to the days of Avraham because many books were lost and are no longer extant among us, books such as the prophecies of Nathan and Iddo and the Chronicles of the Kings of Yisrael and the songs and proverbs of King Shlomo.

Many literary works – both Jewish and secular – have been lost to the ages, but we rarely think about this. Indeed, a part of Ibn Ezra's commentary has been lost: in his commentary on *Sefer Yeshayahu* [the Book of Isaiah], Ibn Ezra refers the reader to a particular comment on *Sefer Yechezkel* [the Book of Ezekiel], but that comment cannot be found in any current edition of the book. Ibn Ezra may have forgotten that he wrote it; or he may

have written the first comment with the intention of writing the second, but never did; or, what is more likely, the second comment was somehow lost. We also know that many of Rashi's comments have disappeared, both on the *TaNaKH* [Torah, Prophets, and Writings] and on the Talmud.

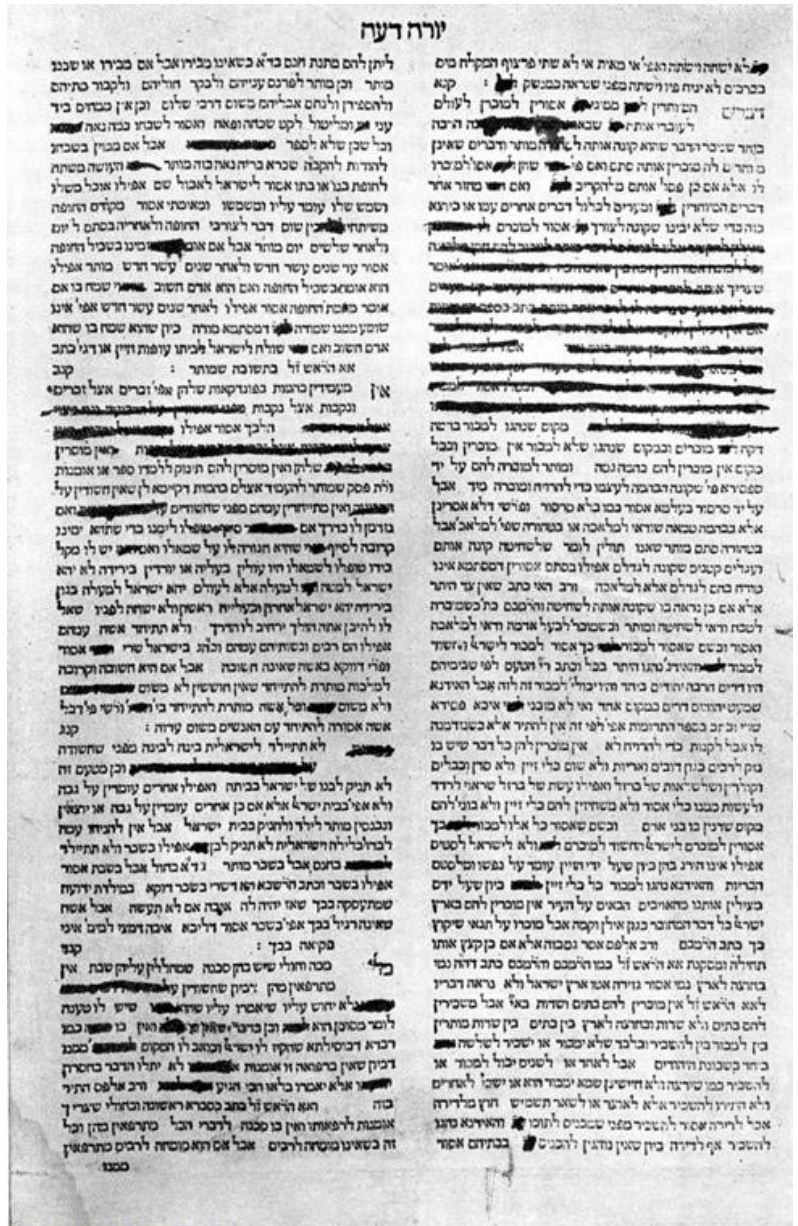
How did these works disappear? One likely reason is that all of these texts, both the Biblical works and the commentaries, predate the invention of printing. The only way to transmit these works was through hand-copied scrolls, which were expensive and hard to come by. As a result, it must have been easy for such manuscripts to become accidentally lost, forgotten, or damaged.

It is also possible that texts were purposefully destroyed. We know historically that Christian censors in the 16th century deleted anything that they deemed as anti-Christian. Take this example of a redacted *Shulchan Aruch* [Code of Jewish Law]:

There were also mass book burnings of Jewish tomes at various times in history, such as during the 13th century in Paris and during the 16th century in Rome.

In addition to these lost texts, there are many, many other things that we no longer have knowledge of, only questions. For example, what did the Levite singing sound like in the *Beit HaMikdash* [Temple]? In the ancient world, how did people raise multi-ton stones to build structures such as the pyramids and the *Beit HaMikdash*?

In the information age, some people suffer from the hubris that we have



the answers to essentially everything. It is a humbling experience to realize how much information has been lost throughout history, sadly, most of it never to be reconstructed.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- What might you want to know if we had access to all of the knowledge throughout the history of the world? Why did you choose that thing?
- Should communication, either verbal or written, ever be censored? Why or why not?
- What do you think the “book of the wars of Hashem” mentioned in the verse actually was? What do you think it talked about and listed?