



On Illness: A Natural and Unnatural Phenomenon

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The death of Korah and his band, who are swallowed up by the earth, is generally understood as a punishment for the communal leaders who challenged the authority of Moshe and Aharon. A brief discussion in Tractate Nedarim of the Babylonian Talmud, however, suggests that their punishment was not merely the fact that they died, nor the gruesome path to that fate, but rather the type of death *denied* to them. The Talmud ends up offering not just a fascinating reading of the Korah tale, but also a worldview regarding death that is the culmination of illness.

Background

This week's *parashah* describes Korah's rebellion against Moshe and Aharon:

במדבר טז, ג'

וַיִּקְהָלוּ עַל-מֹשֶׁה וְעַל-אַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֲלֵהֶם רַב-לָכֶם כִּי כָל-הָעֵדָה כֹּהֲנִים וּבְתוֹכָם ה' וּמִדּוּעַ
תִּתְנַשְּׂאוּ עַל-קְהִל ה':

BeMidbar 16:3

They combined against Moshe and Aharon and said to them, “You have gone too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and God is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above God’s congregation?”

In response, Moshe proposes a ceremonial face-off that will clarify the divinely-sanctioned election of him and his brother:

וַיִּשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה וַיִּפֹּל עַל-פָּנָיו: ⁵וַיְדַבֵּר אֶל-קָרַח וְאֶל-כָּל-עֲדָתוֹ לֵאמֹר בֹּקֶר וַיָּדַע ה' אֶת-אֲשֶׁר-לֹו
וְאֶת-הַקָּדוֹשׁ וְהַקָּרִיב אֵלָיו וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר יִבְחַר-בּוֹ יִקְרִיב אֵלָיו: ⁶זֹאת עֲשׂוּ קְחוּ-לָכֶם מִחֹתוֹת קָרַח
וְכָל-עֲדָתוֹ: ⁷וַתֵּנוּ בָהֶן אֵשׁ וְשִׁימוּ עֲלֵיהֶן קֹטֶרֶת לִפְנֵי ה' מִחֵר וְהָיָה הָאִישׁ אֲשֶׁר-יִבְחַר ה' הוּא הַקָּדוֹשׁ
רַב-לָכֶם בְּגִי לֹו:

⁴When Moshe heard this, he fell on his face. ⁵Then he spoke to Korah and all his company, saying, “Come morning, God will make known who is His and who is holy, and will grant him access to Himself; He will grant access to the one He has chosen. ⁶Do this: You, Korah and all your band, take fire pans, ⁷and tomorrow put fire in them and lay incense on them before God. Then the man whom God chooses, he shall be the holy one. You have gone too far, sons of Levi!”

But the proposed test of the firepans is not the end of the story here. The nature of the punishment that Korah will suffer is also a key element in vindicating the leadership of Moshe and Aharon, while vitiating their rival's claims:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה בְּזֹאת תֵּדָעוּן ה' שְׁלַחְנִי לַעֲשׂוֹת אֵת כָּל-הַמַּעֲשִׂים הָאֵלֶּה כִּי-לֹא מִלְּבִי: ²⁹אִם-כְּמוֹת
כָּל-הָאָדָם יָמָתוּן אֵלֶּה וּפְקֻדַּת כָּל-הָאָדָם יִפְקֹד עֲלֵיהֶם לֹא ה' שְׁלַחְנִי: ³⁰וְאִם-בְּרִיאָה יִבְרָא ה' וּפְצָתָהּ
הָאֲדָמָה אֶת-פִּיהָ וּבָלְעָה אֹתָם וְאֶת-כָּל-אֲשֶׁר לָהֶם וַיִּרְדּוּ חַיִּים שְׁאֵלָה וַיִּדְעֻתָּם כִּי גִּאָצוּ הָאֲנָשִׁים הָאֵלֶּה
אֶת-ה':

²⁸And Moshe said, “By this you shall know that it was God who sent me to do all these things; that they are not of my own devising: ²⁹if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all people, it was not God who sent me. ³⁰But if God brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up

with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned God.”

In these verses, Moshe adds a dimension to his proposed test: ‘The community will know that he, Moshe, was not sent by God, “if these men die as all men do, if their lot be the common fate of all people.” In other words, if “these men,” Korah and his band, die a natural death, such a death will serve as proof that Moshe is not truly the legitimate leader. On the other hand, “if God brings about something unheard-of... and they go down alive into Sheol, you shall know that these men have spurned God” (vv. 29-30). Not merely the death of Korah itself shall serve as proof of his sin, but rather how it unfolds.

Illness and visitation—The way of the world

The story of the death of Korah is appropriated by the Talmud for a surprising purpose, in the context of a discussion about the *mitzvah* to visit the sick. In Tractate Nedarim, Reish Lakish inquires after a biblical source for this central Jewish expectation. Unexpectedly, he points us to verses from our *parashah*! And the later Sage Rava unpacks for us what this all means:

תלמוד בבלי נדרים לט עמוד ב'

אמר ריש לקיש: רמז לביקור חולים מן התורה מניין? שנאמר: "אם כמות כל האדם ימותון אלה ופקודת כל אדם [יפקדו]" וגו'.

מאי משמע?

אמר רבא: "אם כמות כל האדם ימותון אלה", שהן חולים ומוטלים בעריסתן ובני אדם מבקרים אותן, מה הבריות אומרים? "לא ה' שלחני לזה".

Babylonian Talmud Nedarim 39b

Said Reish Lakish: Where do we have a hint at the requirement to visit the sick in the Torah? When it says: “If these men die like all men die, and if they are visited with what is visited upon all men...” (v. 29).

How precisely does Reish Lakish's teaching work?

Said Rava: "If these men die like all men die"—they become ill and bed-ridden and people come to visit them, what will people say? "God did not send me to this."

Many *midrashim* are based on extraneous or opaque words in a verse and Rava's is no exception. A surface reading of the verse reveals a doublet, a seeming superfluity. "If these men die like all men die" (v. 29) is the first mention of natural, normal death, and "if they are visited with what is visited upon all people" (v. 30) is the second. Rava suggests that the second phrase here should be understood differently: The "visitation" spoken of here is not that of the angel of death, but rather that of fellow human beings offering their comforting presence to one who is ill.

According to this reading, there are few worse punishments than sudden death, death without warning and without the opportunity to be sick, a death without any prologue and that invites no prior visits. According to Rava, the normal process of life includes illness, which offers the possibility for visitation; there is nothing negative about this. The sickness that comes before death is understood here as the way of the world, personally, socially and theologically.

Illness and visitation—Uprooting the way of the world

Nonetheless, the passage in Nedarim continues its engagement with this topic by clarifying just how much illness dramatically transforms our life experience. After Rava's teaching, we are presented with a *baraita*—a Tannaitic source hailing from the time of the Mishnah—that communicates just how much the sick and those who visit them live in a disorderly world.

The *baraita* begins with the following heading: "Visiting the sick has no quantifiable measure." This sort of heading invites many questions: In what sense does it have no quantifiable measure? Does this mean that there is no defined number of required visits?

Perhaps that the length of each visit is unspecified? Maybe there is no prescribed frequency for visits? Yet while this heading is vague, it makes one very clear, general claim: When one visits the sick, one has entered a world without measures, quantities, or quotas. When one visits the sick, one enters into a world that is shady, unclear, even disorderly and chaotic.

The Talmud attempts to pin down the force of this enigmatic opening of the *baraita*. “What is the meaning of ‘has no quantifiable measure?’” the Talmud asks. Different answers are offered, all of which reveal that when sick people are present, theological, social, and personal order is upended.

“Rav Yosef suggested [that this opening phrase means]: There is no quantifiable measure for the reward one receives for performing it.” (This, of course, literally read, could mean that those who visit the sick receive unspeakably large reward or that no reward is received at all!) This turn to a discussion of reward is surprising, an angle we might not have originally considered. But this framing may telegraph deep awareness of just how much energy is invested in coping with and responding to illness, both by sick people themselves and those who surround and care for them. The discourse of reward is a way of reinforcing and encouraging the holy (and costly) work of caring for the sick.

A second explanation follows: “Abaye says: Even a ‘big’ person with a ‘smaller’ one.” The terms of this statement are far from clear—are they referring to age, social standing or some other scale? Is the normal state of affairs for a “big” person to visit a “small” one, or vice-versa? However we read Abaye, though, it is clear that illness and the *mitzvah* to visit the sick upend the normal order of things; visiting the sick is appropriate and necessary even when it crosses social boundaries and destabilizes conventional hierarchies, whatever they may be.

A final answer is suggested: “Rava says: Even a hundred times a day.” It is not clear if this

explanation refers to a number of visits to a single person or the number of times that one might visit any number of sick people in a given day. But whatever it means, we get a picture here of virtually unlimited time that people could/should spend on this *mitzvah* when there are sick people in their community.

Summary

The Talmudic discussion on visiting the sick anchors the *mitzvah* in the story of Korah and teaches us about the complex reality of illness and caring for the sick. On the one hand, illness is the way of the world, and death in the wake of illness is entirely natural. Unlike the unnatural case of Korah, the normal death that follows illness is a sign of routine divine involvement as opposed to divine punishment. Nonetheless, both illness and the practice of visiting the sick create confusion. When we think about theological reward, social hierarchies or the daily routines of the ill and those who visit them, illness and the obligation to visit land us in a world of “no quantifiable measure.”