

Tofel and Lavan: Real Places or Symbolic Names?

Based on Thoughts from Rashi, Rashbam, Even Ezra
and Harav Dovid Feinstein, Shlita
by Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh

Sefer Devarim opens by telling us that Moshe Rabbeinu addressed all of Am Yisroel. This was meant to be a farewell address before his demise. The first verse is an enumeration of places which can be understood in a number of ways.

The Rashbam, known for his devotion to explaining the literal meanings in Chumash, writes that verse 1 is in fact a description of the place that Moshe Rabbeinu addressed Am Yisroel. He writes that the Torah very often will give landmarks to the sites of important events. We find in Bereishis 12:8 that the Torah give a number of details about the place Avraham pitched this tent. The verse reads, 'Bethel on the west and Ai on the east.' We also find that the Torah describing at length where Am Yisroel camped when they left Mitzrayim. In Shemos 14:2 we read that Am Yisroel was to camp before Pi Chachiros between Migdol and the Yam Sufv before Baal Tzefon, a known gigantic idol that that Mitzrayim had placed in that area. We find many such descriptions throughout Tanach. Certainly, Moshe Rabbeinu repeating the mitzvos to all of Am Yisroel would be an important enough event to call for such a description of the place of the event. So, according to Rashbam, the Torah is telling us in the first verse of Devarim about the place that Moshe gave over his words. It was in the valley by the House of Peor. In the desert denotes that they were on eastern side of the Yarden River where there was a desert and not on the western side. Aravah means by the plains of Moav. Opposite the Yam Suf here refers to the part of the Yam Suf that runs on the southeast of Eretz Yisroel as it states in Shemos that Eretz Yisroel was Yam Suf on the East to Yam Plishtim on the west. Paan, Tofel, Lavan , Chatziros and Di Zahav are real places mentioned to us as aides in Knowing where Am Yisroel was at this time. This understanding of the first verse is also the view of the Even Ezra. Even Ezra adds the point that these places were simply not mentioned previously or they were mentioned under different names.

Most of us are familiar with Rashi's understanding based on the Midrashim. Each place was a reference to a past sin that Moshe that only hinted at as a gentle reminder not to be repeated without explicitly stating the sin. Di Zahav is a reference to the sin of the golden calf. Regarding Tofel and Lavan Rashi quotes Rabbi Yochanan who states that these places are not real places but hints to fact they complained [taflu]about the man which was white.

My Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Dovid Feinstein, Shlita, asks the following on the phraseology of ‘between Paran and Tofel and Lavan. Firstly, the word between suggests a connection as in this instance there should be a connection between Paran and Tofel. However Paran is a reference to the sin of the spies and Tofel and Lavan is a reference to the sin of the complaining about the man which took place after Aharon’s demise thirty-eight years later. How are these two sins connected? Secondly, Tofel can mean attach and Lavan means white which means the people attached themselves to each other to complain about the man which was white. Why is there such an emphasis on the white color?

Rav Dovid Feinstein, Shlita, answers that the connection between Paran and Tofel and Lavan is that both are allusions to gifts from Hashem. In both places Am Yisroel complained about something that was truly a gift from Hashem. Both of these gifts, however, also demonstrate that they were constantly under Hashem’s careful watch. Eretz Yisroel is described in Devarim 11:12 as the land that Hashem’s eyes are on from the beginning of the year till the end of the year. They did not appreciate the prospect of living in a land that Hashem watches over them and the land so carefully. Similarly, the man always came out to be the exact amount needed for each individual. Also the man could not be saved from day to day. Each person had to be careful in his/her daily conduct to merit their food for the next day. This caused Am Yisroel to watch or ‘whiten’ their ways as Chazal tell us in the Gemara Yoma 75a. So they constantly were made aware of Hashem’s watching over them. In both instances Am Yisroel to realize all of this watching was for our good. All of this watching by Hashem is really to show how special we are to him.

This is an important message for us at this time of the year. As is known Parshas Devarim is always read before Tisha B’Av when we commemorate the destructions of both Batei Mikdashim and our going into exile. Even in our exile, Hashem is still watching us and wants to protect us just as he did in the past. Though we do not see it at present, Hashem is still watching us and yearning to bring about our final Geulah. May we all merit the Geulah in the near future and experience Hakadosh Baruch Hu’s direct watch and care over us for all times. Amen.