

Date: 8 Tammuz 5786 (June 23, 2026)

Torah Portion: Chukat / Balak

Topic: Spreading the Blame and the Pain

The Midrash draws an inference from the juxtaposition in Scripture between Yisrael's unsuccessful attempt to gain passage through the land of Edom and the passing of Aharon (Num. 20:22–29). This reflects the same principle expressed elsewhere in Scripture: “Eliezer son of Dodavah of Mareshah prophesied against Yehoshaphat, saying, ‘Because you have allied yourself with Ahaziah, YHWH has wrecked your undertakings’” (2 Chr. 20:37). Because Yehoshaphat, the righteous king of Yehudah, chose to join himself with Ahaziah, the wicked king of Yisrael, YHWH caused their joint undertaking to fail.

So too here. Because the Yisraelites associated themselves with the wicked Esau by seeking passage through his land, they lost the righteous Aharon. Elohim had not instructed Yisrael to attempt passage through the land of Edom. On the contrary, He had already informed them that their request would be denied (Num. 20:14–21; Deut. 2:4–8). Nevertheless, they persisted and sent emissaries in an effort to persuade the Edomites. Therefore, they lost the righteous Aharon at that time.

Although Elohim explicitly stated that Aharon was to die because of his part in the incident of the Waters of Strife (Num. 20:12, 24), the Midrash teaches that Yisrael's association with Edom contributed to the timing of his departure. Instead of remaining with the nation until they stood at the threshold of the Promised Land, as Moshe did, Aharon was taken from them at this earlier stage.

At first glance, however, this teaching appears puzzling. Scripture itself provides a different reason for Aharon's death—his participation in the episode of the Waters of Strife, which deprived both Moshe and Aharon of the privilege of entering the Holy Land. How then can the Midrash attribute his loss to Yisrael's attempt to pass through Edom?

The answer becomes clearer when viewed from another perspective. Granted, Aharon sinned in connection with the Waters of Strife and was therefore destined to die in the Wilderness. Yet why were the people required to lose their beloved leader at that particular time? Why were they deprived of the sage and patriarchal figure who reconciled disputes, restored broken friendships, preserved marriages, and fostered peace and brotherhood throughout the nation?

The death of Aharon was no ordinary loss. His passing brought forth an outpouring of grief from every segment of Yisrael, and the entire nation mourned him for thirty days (Num. 20:29). The Sages teach that Aharon was a lover of peace and a pursuer of peace (Avot 1:12). He would reconcile husband and wife, friend and friend, and restore harmony wherever discord threatened to divide the community. The absence of such a man would inevitably leave behind sorrow, discord, and divisions that he had once prevented through his constant efforts to pursue shalom.

Yet “the judgments of YHWH are true, righteous altogether” (Ps. 19:9). Elohim's judgments are not only true in themselves; they are righteous in all their ramifications. When YHWH decrees a misfortune upon an individual, He takes into account how that event will affect everyone connected to that person—spouse, family, friends, students, and the wider community. His justice is measured with perfect precision, ensuring that every consequence serves a righteous purpose.

Accordingly, if Aharon was to die and leave the nation bereft of his guidance and inspiration, there had to be sufficient justification not only for his punishment, but also for the widespread grief and loss that his departure would bring upon the people. The Midrash therefore teaches that such justification did indeed exist: “Because the Yisraelites associated themselves with this wicked Esau—by attempting to pass through his land—they lost that righteous Aharon.”

This principle is echoed in the deeper teachings of the Zohar. The Zohar frequently portrays Yaakov and Esau as representatives of opposing spiritual domains. Yaakov embodies holiness, covenant, and attachment to YHWH, while Esau symbolizes the forces that stand in opposition to that holiness. The Zohar teaches that attachment is never spiritually neutral; a person is influenced by that to which he binds himself. Communities likewise rise or fall according to the company they keep. Thus, when Yisrael sought favor from Edom despite YHWH's prior indication that passage would be denied, they entered into a relationship that carried spiritual consequences beyond the immediate political objective.

The Tanya develops a similar theme. It explains that every thought, speech, and action either strengthens the side of holiness (*kedushah*) or nourishes the opposing realm known as the *sitra achra*. Human choices create spiritual attachments that affect not only the individual but also the collective environment. From this perspective, Yisrael's attempt to secure acceptance from Edom reflected more than a diplomatic initiative. It revealed a subtle dependence upon human accommodation rather than complete reliance upon the direction of YHWH. Such misplaced trust inevitably carried consequences for the nation.

This principle is also reflected in the Renewed Covenant. Shaul warns, "Do not be deceived: 'Bad company corrupts good morals'" (1 Cor. 15:33). Likewise, he asks, "What fellowship has righteousness with lawlessness? And what communion has light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). These passages do not prohibit interaction with the nations, but they do warn against alliances and partnerships that compromise covenantal faithfulness. The concern is not mere association but identification with values and priorities that oppose the will of Elohim.

The story of Aharon therefore becomes more than a historical account. It stands as a lesson concerning the responsibility of a covenant people to guard their distinct calling. Aharon embodied peace, reconciliation, unity, and devotion to YHWH. He represented the spiritual harmony that held the nation together. When Yisrael sought acceptance from Edom despite YHWH's warning, they demonstrated a failure to fully trust His guidance. Measure for measure, they lost the very man who most perfectly embodied the peace and spiritual stability they were seeking to preserve.

Seen in this light, the Midrash is not denying Aharon's personal responsibility in the matter of the Waters of Strife. Aharon's sin determined that he would not enter the Land. Rather, the Midrash explains why the nation as a whole was made to experience the pain of losing him when they did. His personal failing brought about the decree, but Yisrael's misguided association with Edom provided the measure-for-measure basis for the nation itself to suffer the loss of its great peacemaker.

Thus, the judgment was righteous on every level. Aharon's decree was fulfilled because of the Waters of Strife, while the people learned the costly consequences of seeking fellowship where YHWH had not directed them to seek it. As Scripture declares, "The Rock, His work is perfect, for all His ways are justice" (Deut. 32:4). The loss of Aharon teaches that YHWH's judgments extend beyond the individual to the community, and that alliances formed contrary to His counsel inevitably bring loss, while trust in His guidance preserves life, blessing, unity, and peace.

Shalom.