

Fruit on the Staff

Classic Questions

When did the fruit begin to develop? (v. 23)

Rashi: After the flowers fell off.

Rashbam: If Moshe found the staff after it had already sprouted almonds, then nobody would have witnessed the flowering and early growth stages. Thus it appears that Moshe found the staff when it was in the flowering stage, and he took it out to the Jewish people who witnessed it produce and develop fruit.

Da'as Zekeinim: Apparently, there were two types of flowers. Some which fell off and developed into almonds, and other flowers which remained attached to the staff.

Abarbanel: Normally, when almonds grow, the flowers fall off first. But here a miracle occurred and the flowers, unripened fruit, and almonds all were present at the same time. And they remained there throughout summer and winter.

The Rebbe's Teachings

Flowers and Almonds (v. 23)

In verse 23 we read how Moshe discovered the miraculous blossoming of Aharon's staff, "Moshe came to the Tent of Testimony, and—look!—Aharon's staff...had blossomed! It had blossomed, started to produce fruit, and developed ripe almonds."

In the following verse, we read, "Moshe took out all the staffs from before G-d, to the children of Israel. They saw [what had happened]."

This raises the question: Moshe appears only to have discovered the staff after it had blossomed, shed its flowers, and developed ripe almonds — and it was at this point that he showed the staff to the Jewish people. What, then, was achieved by the staff's first blossoming and producing unripened fruit, if these miracles were not witnessed?

The commentators offer various solutions to this problem:

Rashbam explains that Moshe actually found the staff in its flowering stage and took it out to the people before the fruit started to grow. Da'as Zekeinim writes that the flowers that Moshe saw remained, and the Jewish people saw others form and develop into almonds before their eyes. And Abarbanel explains that all the flowers, unripened fruit and almonds miraculously remained on the staff at the same time.

Why does Rashi not offer an explanation for how the Jewish people witnessed the miracle of Aharon's staff flowering and producing fruit, writing only that the flowers fell before Moshe found the staff?

The Explanation

When Rashi states that the flowers fell off, he does not mean to say that Moshe left them on the floor of the Tent of Meeting. Rather, Moshe would have taken the staff (to which ripe almonds were attached) together with the detached flowers, and shown them to the Jewish people. In this way, the people would have themselves understood that the almonds did not appear suddenly on the staff, but that they underwent a natural growth process, first blossoming, then shedding flowers, producing unripe fruit and finally ripening.

Thus, at the literal level, Rashi understood that the sprouting of almonds on Aharon's staff was partially miraculous and partially natural. Initially, for almonds to grow from a dry stick, a miracle was clearly required; but once this had occurred, the growth of the almonds proceeded in a natural (albeit accelerated) manner.

Why did Rashi reject the interpretation of the other commentators who argue that more miracles occurred? Surely, at the literal level, the more supernatural behavior the staff exhibited, the more impressive would be the sign of Aharon's authenticity, which was the very purpose of this exercise?

Rashi understood from the context of this passage that the staff would be a more powerful sign if it exhibited both supernatural and natural qualities. For up to this point, Aharon's Divinely appointed role had been confirmed by a series of miracles, including the earth's swallowing Korach's men alive (16:31-33) and a fire from heaven consuming the remaining rebels (ibid. 35). Nevertheless, the very next day, "the entire congregation of Israel complained against Moshe and Aharon, saying, 'You have killed G-d's people!'" (17:6).

Why had Korach's demise through Divine intervention not convinced the people of Aharon's validity as High Priest? Because the miracles had only proven Divine consent to Aharon's position as High Priest. But perhaps, the people wondered, there might be a more worthy candidate than Aharon who might also meet with Divine approval. Perhaps, G-d had only consented to Aharon's appointment due to Moshe's prayers, but in fact a better High Priest could be found—especially as Aharon had been instrumental in the sin of the Golden Calf.

Therefore, Rashi concluded that the miracle of the staff must have been intended to prove, not only Divine consent to Aharon's appointment, but furthermore, some indication of his genuine suitability for the position.

This led Rashi to formulate his stance, that at the literal level the staff blossomed miraculously, but developed naturally: The miraculous beginnings of the almond flower represented the Divine approval of Aharon's priesthood from above. But then, the almonds developed naturally, as a sign to the Jewish people that Aharon was naturally suited to be the High Priest.

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The Chumash incorporates a flowing English translation of the Torah which is loyal to the commentary of Rashi and includes 'Classic questions' that are drawn from a range of commentators and are then ingeniously brought together by the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, of righteous memory.

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