



**RABBI JOSH
BOTWINICK**



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A Late Night Drive Through Machtesh Ramon

It was a Saturday night, and our rickety car started down the winding path into the Negev’s giant crater, Machtesh Ramon. “For such an enormous and unusual geological structure,” I said to my wife, “Wouldn’t you think this crater should be mentioned somewhere in Tanach?”

Every tour guide seems to know the exact path Avraham walked to Akeidah Yitzchak, down to where he stopped to tie his sandals. Just the previous week, I had seen the words, “ויעלו בנגב” “they went up from the South” (Bamidbar 13:22), engraved into a traffic circle in Elazar, suggesting that the spies from last week’s parsha had passed right through there on

their way up from the South. These types of Biblical connections are everywhere you turn in Israel.

So how could it be, I wondered aloud in the car, that we have thousands of years worth of stories, journeys and battles in the land of Israel, and yet there’s not a single mention of this impossible-to-miss, 500m deep, 40km long, 10km wide, gaping crater not too far South from Be’er Sheva?

...Or is it mentioned?

Just then, we went around a curve and passed a sign: Midbar Paran, the Paran Desert.

Paran? Hey, that’s where the story of the spies took place. The Torah relates,

”וַיֵּלְכוּ וַיָּבֹאוּ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל־אַהֲרֹן וְאֶל־כָּל־עֵדֻת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־מִדְבַּר פָּאֵרָן קְדֻשָּׁה”

“They went straight to Moses and Aaron and the whole Israelite community at Kadesh in the wilderness of Paran” (13:26).

So we started to think: are there any gigantic holes in the ground mentioned anytime around the story of the spies? And then it hit me: What if the next major story, the dramatic episode of Korach and his men being swallowed up by the earth, happened right nearby at the gaping crater of Machtesh Ramon? Could it be?

As we drove down the pitch-dark sandy

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roads, the evidence for Korach being “swallowed up” by Machtsh Ramon started building up:

1. The crater is right next to Midbar Paran, the last explicit location the Jewish people were camped before the Korach story.

2. Machtsh Ramon is not actually a “crater,” as craters are formed from impact from above, while a machtesh is formed from erosion from beneath. This is just what Korach and his men encountered: “ותבקע האדמה אשר תחתיה” “The ground underneath them burst open” (16:31).

3. In fact, the geology of the machtesh is so unique that the official scientific term is actually the Hebrew word “machtesh,” since almost all of the machteshs in the world are in Israel. Machtsh Ramon is the largest such structure in the world. Indeed, Moshe proclaims, “ואם בריאה יברא ה' ופצתה האדמה את פיה”, “But if the Lord brings about something unheard-of, so that the ground opens its mouth” (Bamidbar 16:30). Machtsh Ramon certainly fits the part of being such a unique creation.

4. The Torah refers to the ground opening its “mouth,” a peculiar way of describing a hole in the ground. This may be a stretch, but look at the map below, taken from Google Earth. Picture Machtsh Hagadol and Machtsh Hakatan, outlined in black, as two eyes. Doesn't that make Machtsh Ramon... the mouth? Indeed, “ותפתח הארץ את פיה” “and the earth opened its mouth” (16:32).



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