

PARSHAT B'HA'ALOTCHA

June 13, 2019 – 21 Sivan 5780

Annual (Numbers 8:1-12:16): Hertz p. 605

Haftarah (Zechariah 2:14-4:7): Hertz p. 620

Torah Portion Summary

God tells Moshe to instruct Aaron about lighting the menorah in the Tabernacle, and to purify the Levites and consecrate them to serve in the sanctuary. At the beginning of the second year after the Exodus, God tells Moshe that the Israelites are to offer the Passover sacrifice at twilight on the fourteenth day of the month. Hearing this, some men who had contracted ritual impurity through contact with a corpse and therefore could not offer the sacrifice, approached Moshe and Aaron and asked if there was a way they too could participate. Moshe brings their question to God, who says that anyone who is prevented from offering the sacrifice at its proper time due to impurity or distance may do so one month later. From the time the Tabernacle was set up it was covered by a cloud, which appeared as a fire at night. This cloud would lift up to signal the Israelites to break camp and travel and rest over the Tabernacle when it was time to make camp, whether for a few days or a year. God instructs Moshe to have two silver trumpets made. They would be used to send messages to the Israelites, calling them to assemble or to march. In the future, once the Israelites were settled in their land, the trumpets were to be sounded to mark war and festivals. Shortly after they set out from Sinai, the people begin complaining. God becomes angry and sends a fire into the camp. The lesson doesn't take, for soon the people are complaining again, this time about the *manna* and all the wonderful things they used to eat in Egypt. Moshe complains to God, asking how he is supposed to lead the people by himself. God tells Moshe to gather 70 elders and officers, and God will give them a share of Moshe's spirit so they can help him. Moshe also is to tell the people that God will give them meat to eat, so much meat that it will sicken them. God brings huge numbers of quails for the people to eat, but also brings a plague to punish them for their ingratitude. Miriam and Aaron speak against Moshe, ostensibly because he had married a Cushite woman. However, their real issue is jealousy, for they believe they should be considered equal to Moshe in prophecy. God tells them that Moshe is unique and strikes Miriam with *tzara'at*. Moshe prays for her healing.

I. The people took to complaining bitterly before the Lord. The Lord heard and was incensed: a fire of the Lord broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. (Numbers 11:1)

1. *K'mit-on'nim*, took to complaining, is only a term denoting a pretext; that is, they seek a pretext whereby to separate themselves from the Omnipresent, a pretext that is evil in the ears of the Lord; that is, they intended that it should reach His ears and that He should be provoked. They said: Woe unto us, how weary we have become on this journey; it is three days that we have not rested from the misery of the journey. (Rashi--Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, France)
2. As a result of experiencing the frustrations connected with the tedious journey. (Rashbam--Rabbi Shmuel ben Meir, 1080-1158, France, Rashi's grandson)
3. Regarding the travail of the road; not that they truly complained in their hearts, for they had no worthwhile reason to murmur. Rather, they murmured with their words to test God. (Rabbi Ovadia ben Jacob Sforno, 1475-1550, Italy)
4. As they got further away from Mount Sinai, which was near an inhabitable settlement, and entered the great and dreadful wilderness on their first journey, they became upset and said: "What shall we do? How shall we live in this wilderness? What shall we eat and what shall we drink? How shall we endure the trouble and the suffering, and when shall we come out of here?" . . . They spoke in the bitterness of their soul as do people who suffer pain, and this was evil in the sight of the Eternal, since they should have followed Him "in joy and gladness over the abundance of everything" (Deuteronomy 28:47) that He gave them, but they behaved like people acting under duress and compulsion, murmuring and complaining about their condition. (Ramban--Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270, Spain)

5. "Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!" (11:6) It is not nourishment we lack – what we lack are the tasty stimulating foods that excite the appetite. We miss the change of diet so necessary for health; the complete monotony, the unvarying sameness of our food makes it unbearable. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)

Sparks for Discussion

Complaining in the wilderness is a frequent occurrence in the Torah. What were the people complaining about this time? Were they tired, bored, rebellious, or something else? Were their complaints justified? Why was God so angry? What is the best way to pursue a legitimate complaint? What is the best way to respond to whiners?

II. A youth ran out and told Moshe, saying, "Eldad and Meidad are acting the prophet in the camp!" And Yehoshua son of Nun, Moshe's attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, "My Lord Moshe, restrain them!" But Moshe said to him, "Are you wrought up [elsewhere: jealous] on my account? Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord put His spirit upon them!" (Numbers 11:27-29)

1. Rabbi Achva son of Rabbi Zeira said: Yehoshua made two remarks in the presence of Moshe that failed to find favor in his sight – one in connection with the appointment of the elders and the other in connection with the golden calf. In connection with the appointment of the elders – it is written, "My Lord Moshe, restrain them!" by which he meant, "Destroy them and remove them from the world." Moshe replied to him, "Are you wrought up on my account?" by which he really meant, "Yehoshua, am I jealous of you [who will succeed me]? Would that my sons were like you. Would that all Israel were like you! Would that all the Lord's people were prophets!" (Kohelet Rabbah 9:11)
2. In my view the prophet's words on this occasion constitute a remarkable example of humility. Apart from not envying those who were his disciples and the work of his own hands (as alluded to in the Talmud Sanhedrin 105b: "A man envies everyone except his own son and disciple"), he earnestly desired that all the people of God should be prophets and that the Almighty should bestow His spirit upon them without him. Although this was a thing of which every other man would be jealous, he did not display jealousy. (Akeidat Yitzhak--Rabbi Isaac Arama, 1420-1494, Spain)
3. Are you standing up for my rights? Do you find Eldad and Meidad's conduct an infringement on my rights, and think that you have to stand up for them? The behavior of Eldad and Meidad at the moment when the elders were called to form the first Sanhedrin, and Moshe remarks thereon, are of the deepest importance for all the successors of this Jewish "Institute of Elders" for all time. It proclaims that by the appointment of the highest intellectual and spiritual authority in Israel, no monopoly in intellectuality or spirituality is to be formed, that the spiritual gifts of God are in no way dependent on office or profession, and that the lowest in the nation could be considered as equally worthy of the spirit of God as the first official in the highest office. But Moshe's answer to Yehoshua remains for all teachers and leaders as the brilliant example they should keep before their eyes as the highest ideal aim of their work, viz., to make themselves superfluous, that the people of all classes and ranks reach such a spiritual level that they no longer require teachers and leaders. (Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, 1808-1888, Germany)

Sparks for Discussion

Why do you think Yehoshua was so upset? Describe Moshe's demeanor and tone of voice when he answered Yehoshua. Why do you think that Moshe wished all the people might be prophets? Rabbi Hirsch says that the highest ideal of teachers and leaders should be to make themselves superfluous. Do you agree? Is the purpose of a leader to define the goal and the path to it and lead the people there? Is it the leader's job to be a facilitator, helping the people to achieve whatever goals they have chosen for themselves? Does your definition of leadership apply in all realms, or is religious leadership different from political leadership and business leadership? What are the essential qualities of a leader?