**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BEHAALOTEKHA**

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Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Behaalotekha includes a famous pair of verses (10:35-36) that are surrounded on either side by unusual symbols – specifically, upside-down *nun*’s – which appear to serve as “parentheses” setting these verses apart from the rest of the text. The first of these verses (“*Va-yehi bi-nso’a ha-aron*”) tells that when *Benei Yisrael* embarked from Sinai on the journey that was to have taken them directly to the Land of Israel, Moshe said a prayer that God’s enemies should be scattered. This likely refers to the battle that was to have been imminently waged against the Canaanites to vanquish them from *Eretz Yisrael*, a battle that was delayed forty years due to *Benei Yisrael*’s wrongdoing (see Seforno). The second verse (“*U-v’nucho yomar*”)tells of Moshe’s proclamation when the people encamped, asking that God’s presence should reside among the people.

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (116a) cites the view of Rebbe that this pair of verses is enclosed by “parentheses” to indicate that “*sefer chashuv hu bi-fnei atzmo*” – these verses constitute an independent book. According to this view, there are actually seven, rather than five, books of the Torah, as the book of Bamidbar consists of three separate books: the section from the beginning of Sefer Bamidbar until this pair of verses; these two verses; and the rest of Sefer Bamidbar.

How exactly are we to understand this concept, that these two verses comprise a separate “book”?

An especially novel approach is taken by Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his [*Yalkut Yehuda*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2761&st=&pgnum=72). He writes that these verses constitute an independent book in the sense that they deal with warfare. This pair of verses speaks of the war that *Benei Yisrael* were to have waged at that time, after embarking from Sinai on the journey that was to have brought them immediately to their land, which they would have then conquered. War, Rav Ginsburg writes, must be perceived as a “*sefer chashuv bi-fnei atzmo*” – a separate, independent reality. The situation of war necessitates suspending certain basic codes of behavior. Most obviously, it necessitates taking human life, which in other contexts is the most grievous offense one can commit. The Torah also relaxes to some degree its usual standards of sexual morality, permitting, under certain conditions, relations with a female captive. Eating non-kosher food is also allowed under certain circumstances when fighting a war (Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 8:1). The “parentheses” surrounding these verses, Rav Ginsburg suggests, indicates to us that the reality of warfare, and the attendant suspension or modification of certain fundamental Torah laws, must be regarded as its own “*sefer*,” an exception that stands separate and apart from ordinary life. The Torah recognizes that war is occasionally necessary, and the harsh realities of warfare necessitate temporarily suspending certain basic religious precepts, but it insists that this suspension remain the exception and never become the rule. These “parentheses” serve the vitally important purpose of reminding us that the unique measures which apply under the conditions of war are exceptional and outside the pale of acceptable behavior in all other contexts, and that we must ensure not to allow these exceptions to lower our standards of ethics and spiritual devotion under ordinary circumstances.

Sunday

Parashat Behaalotekha begins with the command that the *menorah* in the *Mishka*nshould be kindled each day. Rashi, in one of the more famous passages in his Torah commentary, explains (based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*) that this command is reiterated here as a source of reassurance to Aharon, who felt disheartened after the festive inauguration of the *Mishkan*. As the final section of the previous parasha, Parashat Naso, describes in great detail, the event of the *Mishkan*’s inauguration included elaborate sacrifices offered by each of the nation’s tribal leaders. The only tribe which was not represented was Aharon’s tribe, Levi, and Aharon’s exclusion caused him great distress. God sought to console Aharon by reminding him of the privilege he was granted to light the *menorah* each day.

Already the Ramban questioned this account, asking why specifically the kindling of the *menorah* would serve as a source of solace to Aharon. Of all the special privileges given to Aharon, which included the daily incense offering and the annual Yom Kippur service, why did God note specifically the kindling of the *menorah*?

Rav Aryeh Leib Baron, in his [*Yesamach Chayim* (p. 183)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48282&st=&pgnum=179&hilite=), suggests an answer by more carefully examining Rashi’s terminology in this passage. Rashi writes that God told Aharon that his privilege was greater than that of the tribal leaders “in that you kindle and prepare the lamps [of the *menorah*]” (“*she-ata madlik u-meitiv et ha-neirot*”). The “consolation” came not from the fact that Aharon kindled the lamps of the *menorah*, but rather from the fact that he kindled the lamps and also prepared them after they were extinguished for the next evening’s kindling. The tribal leaders offered voluntary, one-time sacrifices to inaugurate the altar, but did not perform any act that signified continuity. Aharon’s kindling of the *menorah*, however, also included the role of *hatavat ha-neirot* – cleaning the lamps in preparation for the next night’s lighting. His involvement was inherently ongoing and constant. Whereas the *nesi’im* participated in a one-time event, Aharon’s participation in the *Mishkan* was consistent and enduring.

The greatest privileges we have are not the dramatic, one-time events, but rather our day-to-day routine of good deeds. The “lights” of goodness that we “kindle” each day are more significant that the occasional great moments that we have. Therefore, it is critical that we involve ourselves not only in the “kindling,” but also in the “*hatava*” – in ensuring that we develop consistent habits and routines so that we “shine” each day, without exception, each of us doing his or her share to add a bit more light and goodness into the world.

Monday

Yesterday, we noted Rashi’s famous comment explaining why the *mitzva* of kindling the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* is reiterated in the beginning of Parashat Behaalotekha. Based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, Rashi writes that Aharon felt distressed over having not participated in the festive inauguration of the altar, which was celebrated by all the other tribal leaders offering special sacrifices. In order to reassure Aharon and alleviate his uneasy feelings, God reminded him of the great privilege he had to light the *menorah* each day.

Rav Aryeh Leib Baron, in his [*Yesamach Chayim* (p. 184)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48282&st=&pgnum=180), offers a novel explanation of Rashi’s comments (in addition to the first approach Rav Baron suggested, which we mentioned yesterday). He writes that the Torah here refers not to the daily kindling of the *menorah*, but rather to the initial kindling on the day of the *Mishkan*’s inauguration. Rav Baronnotes the Rambam’s ruling in *Hilkhot Bi’at Mikdash* (9:7), based on the Gemara (Yoma 27), that the kindling of the *menorah* does not require a *kohen*; this *mitzvah* can be fulfilled even by a non-*kohen*. Already the Ritva (cited by the *Kesef Mishneh*) raises the question of why God here in Parashat Behaalotekha directs the command regarding the kindling of the *menorah* specifically to Aharon, if any member of *Benei Yisrael* can perform this ritual. Rav Baron answers this question by suggesting that the command here relates specifically to the initial kindling with which the *menorah* was formally consecrated. Although a non-*kohen* is generally eligible to kindle the *menorah*, the formal consecration of the *menorah* when the *Mishkan* was inaugurated required specifically Aharon. As a precedent to this concept, Rav Baron notes the famous question surrounding the Chanukah miracle, as to why the *Chashmonaim* did not kindle the *menorah* with impure oil, in light of the *halakha* permitting performing the Temple service in a state of impurity if most of the nation is in such a state (*tum’a hutra be-tzibur*). The *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* answered that while performing the service in a state of impurity is generally allowed under such circumstances, in the case of the *Chashmonaim*, they needed to rededicate the *Mikdash* after it had been defiled by the Greeks. And when the Temple is formally consecrated, the *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* asserted, *tum’a* is unacceptable, even in a situation where the majority of the Jewish Nation is in a state of impurity. Rav Baron suggests that if, indeed, stricter standards apply when the *Mikdash* is formally inaugurated, then we may consider the possibility that specifically Aharon needed to perform the initial kindling of the *menorah*, even though this *mitzva* can normally be performed by a non-*kohen*.

On this basis, Rav Baron explains Rashi’s comments. He writes that God pointed to Aharon’s initial kindling of the *menorah* as an example of his unique stature. The twelve *nesi’im* offered special sacrifices to celebrate the *Mishkan*’s inauguration, but what effected the consecration of the altar was the service of the *kohanim* who tended to the sacrifices – not the *nesi’im*’s gesture. Just as the *menorah*’s consecration required specifically Aharon’s kindling, likewise, the altar’s formal consecration was effected specifically by Aharon and his sons, and not by the tribal leaders. And thus although Aharon did not offer special sacrifices along with the other *nesi’im*, he was reassured with the knowledge that the formal consecration of the altar – like that of the *menorah* – was effected only by the *kohanim*.

Tuesday

Rashi, in one of the more famous passages in his Torah commentary, writes that Aharon felt dismayed over his exclusion from the *chanukat ha-nesi’im* – the special sacrifices offered by the tribal leaders to celebrate the consecration of the *Mishkan*. The leader of every tribe except Aharon’s, Levi, participated in this celebration, and so Aharon felt distressed. God sought to reassure Aharon by reminding him of the privilege he was granted to kindle the *menorah* each day. Already the Ramban raised the question of why Aharon, who was selected as the *kohen gadol*, and whose tribe was designated for the exclusive role of tending to the *Mishkan*, should feel slighted over his exclusion from the *chanukat ha-nesi’im*.

[Rav Yaakov Neuberger](http://torahweb.org/torah/2013/parsha/rneu_behalos.html) suggested a novel and insightful explanation of Rashi’s famous comments, proposing that the *nesi’im*’s prominence on this occasion raised in Aharon’s mind the question as to the relative importance of his and their roles. Aharon’s duties were centered in, albeit not necessarily exclusive to, the *Mishkan*. He spent his days in the sacred domain of the *Mishkan* tending to God’s earthly abode. The *nesi’im*, by contrast, were the nation’s political leaders, who tended to the nation’s pragmatic needs. They, for example, assisted Moshe in counting the tribes when God commanded that a census be taken. Aharon and the *Leviyim* were responsible for the nation’s spiritual center, whereas the *nesi’im* oversaw the administrative, pragmatic concerns. Aharon spend the bulk of his time in the *Mishkan*, while the *nesi’im* were busy working with the people. And this, Rav Neuberger writes, is what caused Aharon unease:

For twelve days he and his family were left to ponder the relative value of the builders and the preservers; of the streetwise guides and the secluded saints; of those who facilitate transporting the *mishkan* from place to place and those who light up an established sanctuary; of those who help us in sacrifice and prayer and those who would embrace together with us the fullness of human endeavor.

He was disturbed not by his exclusion from the *chanukat ha-nesi’im* per se, but rather by the nagging question of whether his insular work inside the *Mishkan* was as significant as the vital administrative work done by the other tribal leaders.

We might add that for the reason, God responded to Aharon by noting the *mitzva* of kindling the *menorah*. Light has the capacity to illuminate even a space very distant from the source of the flame. Aharon was reminded that although the bulk of his work was done inside the *Mishkan*, the effects were felt far beyond. The actions we perform away from the public eye indeed have an impact, even if we cannot see how. The “lights” we kindle through our study, prayer and observance have an “illuminating” effect that spreads far and wide. And thus both models of leadership and public service – that of Aharon and that of the *nesi’im* – are vitally important, as both make a significant and profound impact upon *Am Yisrael* and upon the world.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Behaalotekha (10:1-10) presents the *mitzva* of sounding the *chatzotzerot* (trumpets) on various occasions. Specifically, the trumpets were to be sounded in the wilderness to assemble the people or to announce that the nation was embarking, and in *Eretz Yisrael*, they were to be sounded on the festivals, when the special sacrifices were offered, and in times of warfare. The Rambam, in *Sefer Ha-mitzvot* (*asei* 59), lists as one of the 613 Biblical commands the requirement to sound the *chatzotzerot* on the festivals and during periods of crisis, such as warfare. (Consistent with his view that temporary commands, which were relevant to only a particular period, are not included in the 613 Biblical commands, the Rambam does not mention the obligation to sound trumpets during the period when *Benei Yisrael* traveled in the wilderness.)

The *Magen Avraham* (576) raised the question of why the *mitzva* of *chatzotzerot* is not observed nowadays during periods of crisis. Although we obviously cannot fulfill the obligation to sound trumpets when the festival sacrifices are being offered, there seems to be no reason not to sound them during times of crisis. Among the numerous answers given to this question is the answer suggested by Rav Moshe Feinstein, in his *Iggerot Moshe* (O.C. 1:169). Rav Moshe notes that the Rambam, curiously, groups together the two different occasions when the *chatzotzerot* were sounded – during the festival offerings, and during times of warfare and other crises. Many writers have raised the question of why the Rambam incorporated both obligations – which apply in very different situations – into a single *mitzva*. Regardless, Rav Moshe infers from the Rambam’s classification that these two requirements are mutually dependent on one another. Specifically, he claims that the same trumpets used in the *Mikdash* during the festivals must be used during times of crisis. If so, then we easily understand why the obligation to sound the *chatzotzerot* during times of crisis is not observed nowadays, as we cannot observe the obligation to sound *chatzotzerot* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*.

A possible early source for Rav Moshe’s theory is the Ritva’s comment (Ta’anit 12) that the *chatzotzerot* are no longer blown for the simple reason that we do not have *chatzotzerot*. Though this explanation may sound simple, it is, in fact, quite difficult to understand. Why do we not simply make *chatzotzerot* so we can fulfill this Torah obligation? Rav Asher Weiss (*Minchat Asher*, Behaalotekha, 19) suggested that in light of Rav Moshe’s theory, we might explain the Ritva to mean that since we do not have *chatzotzerot* in the Temple, we cannot fulfill the obligation to sound *chatzotzerot* during times of crisis, as the same *chatzotzerot* must be used in both contexts.

We might add that Rav Moshe’s theory may perhaps shed light on the fundamental nature of the *mitzva* of *chatzotzerot*. According to Rav Moshe, this *mitzva* in a sense bridges the gap between two opposite experiences: the jubilant festivities in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and the tense-ridden atmosphere of warfare and other dire crises. On Yom Tov, the nation assembled in the *Mikdash* to celebrate their relationship with God; the most distant situation from this celebration is the battlefield, where the soldiers feel frightened and when the nation feels estranged from God, who allowed the dire crisis to unfold. The requirement to use the same trumpets in both contexts perhaps reflects the message conveyed by this *mitzva*, namely, that we must try to maintain our faith and positive outlook even during life’s difficult and challenging moments. The *chatzotzerot* served to help inject some of the joyous spirit and energy of the Yom Tov experience in the *Mikdash* into the tension and gloom of crisis. This *mitzva* calls upon us to find comfort during periods of crisis knowing that we are God’s servants who are under His loving and devoted care. Even when circumstances prevent us from experiencing the special joy of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, the *chatzotzerot* remind us to reflect upon our close connection to the Almighty even when He seems distant, and to thereby ease, if only somewhat, our anxiety and angst during life’s more difficult moments.

Thursday

The Torah writes that after *Benei Yisrael* journeyed from Sinai, where there had been encamped for nearly a year, the people started to complain: “*Va-yehi ha-am ke-mit’onenim*” (11:1). In response, God sent a fire that “consumed at the edge of the camp” (ibid). Rashi cites from the *Sifrei* different opinions as to the meaning of the “*bi-ktzei ha-machaneh*” (“at the edge of the camp”), one of which claims that it refers specifically to the nation’s leaders. This interpretation, of course, raises the difficult question as to why specifically the leaders were punished because of the people’s complaints. Why did God send a fire to kill only the nation’s leaders?

The [Klausenberger Rebbe](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36052&st=&pgnum=171&hilite=) suggested an especially novel, and even striking, explanation of this incident, claiming that it was specifically the leaders who complained, and their complaints were about the people. They bemoaned what they perceived to be the woefully low spiritual state of the nation as they traveled from Sinai, and this is the “complaint” of which the Torah speaks in its brief account of this incident. The Rebbe adds that for this reason the Torah describes the complaints with the term “***ke****-mit’onenim*,” which literally means, “as if they were complaining.” The leaders’ laments about the people were out of place and even incorrect. The people’s condition was not quite as deplorable as the leaders made it out to be. God reacted angrily to the leaders’ complaints, the Rebbe explained, because leaders are to speak in praise of the people under their charge and to focus their attention on the nation’s positive qualities.

The Rebbe’s understanding of this account becomes particularly salient when we consider the context of these complaints. This incident occurred shortly after *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Mount Sinai, which the Midrash, cited by Tosefot in Masekhet Shabbat (116a), compares to the “flight” of schoolchildren after a long school day. *Benei Yisrael* “fled” from Mount Sinai, feeling overburdened and weary from the numerous laws and obligations taught to them during their stay by the mountain. And just after the incident of the *mit’onenim*, we read of the tragedy of *Kivrot Ha-ta’ava*, which unfolded after *Benei Yisrael* pettily expressed disdain for the miraculous manna and demanded a richer “menu” in the wilderness, even pining to return to Egypt. It would certainly seem that the nation’s leaders had plenty to complain about. And yet, according to the Klausenberger Rebbe, the leaders betrayed their position by lamenting the nation’s spiritual shortcomings. Their job was not to complain, but to work to uplift the people. Without overlooking the problems that demand solutions, leaders are to never lose sight of all that is good about the nation, and must constantly sing their praises. When the people themselves fall into negativity and cynicism, the leaders are to remain positive and hopeful, and show faith and confidence in the people’s potential.

According to the Klausenberger Rebbe, then, looking upon, and speaking of, the Jewish People with negativity and lament arouses God’s anger. He demands that we view and talk of *Am Yisrael* with respect and admiration, even as we work to address our nation’s many shortcomings so we can all grow and advance together.

Friday

The final section of Parashat Behaalotekha tells the unsettling story of Miriam and Aharon, who spoke critically and disparagingly of their brother, Moshe, for which Miriam was punished with *tzara’at*. Rashi (12:1), based on the *Sifrei*, explains that Miriam was punished because she initiated the conversation, which revolved around Moshe’s controversial decision to separate from his wife. Moshe’s measure was deemed necessary due to his unique prophetic stature, which required him to be prepared to receive prophecy at any moment. Miriam, however, condemned Moshe’s decision, noting that she and Aharon were also prophets who heard God speak, and they did not need to discontinue their marital relationships.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his [*Yalkut Yehuda*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=2761&st=&pgnum=91&hilite=), insightfully connects this episode with a different story told of Miriam. The Gemara in Masekhet Sota (12a) relates that after Pharaoh decreed that all the newborn Israelite boys should be killed, Amram, Moshe’s father, divorced his wife, setting an example that others followed. This measure was taken as an expression of despair, as the people decided it was best not to bring more children into the world considering the fate that awaited them. Miriam, however, who was a young girl at the time, sharply opposed her father’s decision, noting that divorcing meant that even girls would no longer be born, and thus Amram’s decree was even worse, in a sense, than Pharaoh’s. Amram accepted Miriam’s criticism, and remarried his wife, and the people did the same. Interestingly, here in Parashat Behaalotekha, too, many years later, Miriam condemns a decision made by a family member to divorce his wife, criticizing Moshe’s separation from Tzipora. Rav Ginsburg further notes that Miriam is commonly identified as one of the two midwives who risked their lives by defying Pharaoh’s order to kill the newborn boys. The importance of bringing children into the world was a matter especially dear to Miriam’s heart, it appears, one for which she stood up to the Egyptian king and to her father. And now, decades later, she stands up to Moshe, as well, expressing her staunch opposition to his decision to divorce his wife.

Sometimes, Rav Ginsburg notes, when a person pursues an important ideal regarding which he has especially strong feelings, he is prone to commit wrongs along the way. When we are consumed with a particular issue or concern, our inherently commendable efforts to address that concern may come at the expense of other important and valuable ideals. In Miriam’s case, Rav Ginsburg notes, her dedication to the vitally important values of marriage and children led her to overlook her brother’s unique stature and to fail to accord him proper respect. The story of Miriam, then, reminds us of the need for balance and perspective even as we pursue important values and ideals, to recognize that Torah life encompasses a wide range of obligations and values, not all of which should necessarily be compromised for any particular cause.