**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BEHA'ALOTEKHA**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (129b), in an enigmatic passage, states that a certain “spirit” (or “wind”) named “*tavuach*” roams the earth on Erev Shavuot, and poses grave danger.  Had *Benei Yisrael* not accepted the Torah on this day in the year of *Matan Torah*, the Gemara comments, this spirit would have “butchered their flesh and blood.”  The Gemara thus establishes that the ancient medical practice of bloodletting should not be performed on this day, as it is a dangerous time due to this mysterious spirit.  As further protection against this danger, the Gemara adds, one should avoid bloodletting on any Erev Yom Tov, so that he does not mistakenly undergo this procedure on Erev Shavuot, when this practice is dangerous.

How might we explain this concept?  What might this dangerous “spirit” that surfaces before Shavuot symbolize?

It has been suggested that the Gemara here alludes to the grave “danger” of missed opportunities.  We might intuitively think that a squandered opportunity for achievement is just that – an opportunity that was missed, but not as unfortunate as losing something which we actually had.  The Gemara perhaps seeks here to reframe our conception of missed opportunities, casting them as a harmful, devastating loss.  When an opportunity presents itself – such as that which presented itself to *Benei Yisrael* at the time of the Revelation at Sinai – there is the “threat” of the opportunity being squandered.  Had *Benei Yisrael* not seized the opportunity which was presented to them at Mount Sinai, this would have marked a painful and devastating loss, as the Gemara describes.  We are thus instructed to see all opportunities as a precious and valuable commodity which we must protect, as opposed to an option which we are free to choose or ignore.  Every opportunity for growth and achievement must be approached with a sense of urgency, and with a firm commitment to do everything we can to seize it.  Each such opportunity comes with a dangerous “spirit” – the risk of complacency and disinterest, or of accepting mediocrity – from which we must protect ourselves.  Rather than succumb to this “spirit,” we must remind ourselves that each day’s opportunities are special and unique, and will not be accessible ever again, and they therefore must be capitalized upon to the very fullest and to the very best of our ability.

Sunday

Parashat Beha’alotekha tells the story of the selection of the seventy *zekeinim* (“elders”) who were appointed to assist Moshe in leading *Benei Yisrael*.  Rashi (11:26), based on the Gemara (Sanhedrin 17a), describes the process by which this selection was done.  Six worthy candidates were selected from each of the twelve tribes, for a total of 72 prospective appointees.  To determine which two were excluded from the group of designated *zekeinim*, Moshe conducted a lottery, writing the word “*zakein*” (“elder”) on seventy pieces of paper, and mixing them with two blank pieces of paper.  Each of the seventy-two prospects took a piece of paper, and the two who chose a blank paper were the two whom God had decided not to name as leaders.

Many commentators raised the question of why Moshe went through the trouble of writing the word “*zakein*” on seventy pieces of paper, instead of leaving seventy pieces of paper blank and writing “no” (or something to that effect) on two pieces of paper.  This method would, seemingly, have been a far simpler way of determining which seventy were chosen and which two were excluded.

One possibility (suggested by Rav Eliezer Lebovics, in his *Darkhei Ezri* commentary to Masekhet Sanhedrin) is that the seventy elders chosen to serve as *zekeinim* needed to be formally, actively appointed for the role.  The purpose of the lottery was to designate the selected elders, not to exclude the two other elders.  The seventy chosen elders did not receive the appointment by default, by not having been excluded; they needed to be actively named as *zekeinim*.  Therefore, it was necessary for each of them to receive a written confirmation, as opposed to just not receiving an exclusion notice.

We might also suggest that Moshe’s method was used as a message for the two excluded elders.  This system focused not on that from which these two men were excluded, for which they were deemed unqualified, but on the fact that they were a “blank page,” with an enormous range of possibilities open before them.  When a person is appointed to a role, even a prestigious, coveted role which he had wanted, his appointment has the effect of restricting his opportunities henceforth.  And thus when a person is denied a position he sought, he can take comfort in the fact that he is still a “blank page,” that there are so many other roles that he can explore.  Moshe’s system reframed the situation for those two elders from one of rejection to one of hope and opportunity.

We all have many things that we cannot do, for which we are not qualified, or that are practically beyond our reach.  But rather than focus our attention on what we are incapable of, we should instead appreciate all that we are capable of, the wide range of possibilities open before us, the “blank page” that we are able to fill using the precious resources and talents granted to us by the Almighty.

Monday

We read in Parashat Beha’alotekha of *Benei Yisrael*’s demand for meat after journeying from Mount Sinai, and Moshe’s cries to God express his despair in leading the people who were making such demands. God responded by instructing Moshe to appoint a body of seventy leaders to assist him, and by informing Moshe that He would be providing the people with so much meat that they would be repulsed by it. Moshe replied in disbelief, noting the nation’s large size, and asking, “Can enough sheep and cattle be slaughtered for them to suffice for them? If all the fish in the sea would be drawn for them – would this suffice for them?” (11:22).

Rashi cites from the Tosefta (Sota 6:4) three explanations of Moshe’s question. Rabbi Akiva accepted the plain, straightforward reading, that Moshe actually doubted God’s ability to provide the quantity of meat needed to feed all of *Benei Yisrael* to satiation, and that Moshe sinned by expressing such doubts. Rabbi Shimon, Rabbi Akiva’s student, pointed to Rabbi Akiva’s interpretation as one of the small number of instances where Rabbi Akiva offered an explanation that Rabbi Shimon felt compelled to reject. It is inconceivable, Rabbi Shimon argued, that Moshe – who, later in this *parasha*, is called God’s most “trustworthy” servant (12:7) – doubted God’s ability to supply a large quantity of meat for *Benei Yisrael*. Rabbi Shimon therefore explained that God had informed Moshe of His plan to kill those people who inappropriately craved meat (as we read later – 11:33), and Moshe’s question was why God would provide this large amount of meat just to kill the people afterward. God’s response, as Rabbi Shimon understood it, was that He needed to grant the people’s request despite His plan to kill them afterward in order to prevent people from claiming that He was incapable of supplying meat.

The third interpretation cited by Rashi is that of Rabban Gamliel, who explained that Moshe did not doubt God’s ability to provide an unlimited supply of meat, but noted that the nation did not actually desire meat. They were looking for a reason to complain and protest, and so no amount of meat would end their grumblings. This view is accepted by Seforno, who explains, “How would it suffice to eliminate their complaints, as they are asking for meat only in order to test [God]…” Since God does not interfere with free will, Seforno writes, Moshe said that there was no possibility of God ending their complaints, which did not result from any actual discontent but rather out of a desire to rebel.

Another interpretation of this verse is suggested by the Rashbam, who explains that Moshe here was making an inquiry, not expressing disbelief or questioning God. He was simply asking how God planned on providing such a large supply of food for the people, without doubting His ability to do so.

Rav Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, in his *Yalkut Yehuda*, offers a simple explanation of Moshe’s response to God, noting that people who crave unnecessary luxuries are never satisfied. God had already supplied *Benei Yisrael* with miraculous manna to eat and a miraculous well which provided water to drink. Their basic needs were cared for, but they protested and demanded more. When people crave comforts and amenities, viewing them as a necessity, as opposed to a luxury, they will never feel satisfied. No matter what they have, they will always crave and demand more. And thus Moshe turned to God and bemoaned the fact that although God is certainly capable of providing the people with an unlimited supply of meat and fish, no matter what He would give them would be insufficient, because, alas, they could never be satisfied.

Tuesday

The opening verses of Parashat Beha’alotekha discuss the kindling of the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, and the Torah adds in this context a brief description of the *menorah* (8:4). Rashi, based on a number of Midrashic sources, comments that the Torah describes the *menorah* with the word “*zeh*” (“this”), which refers to something which can be seen and pointed to, because God showed Moshe an image of the *menorah*. Moshe had trouble envisioning the *menorah*, and so God showed him a precise image of how it was to be built, and for this reason the Torah writes, “*Ve-****zeh*** *ma’aseh ha-menorah*” (“And **this** is how the *menorah* was made”).

A more elaborate account of Moshe’s difficulties appears in *Bamidbar Rabba* (15:10), which relates that God told Moshe several times how to build the *menorah*, but each time, Moshe forgot the information. Finally, God showed Moshe an image of the *menorah*, but even then, Moshe could not figure out how it should be made. God sent Moshe to Betzalel, the chief artisan assigned over the *Mishkan*’s construction, to tell him to make the *menorah*. Betzalel proceeded to build the *menorah* without any difficulty. Moshe, understandably, was stunned that Betzalel was able to build the structure which he had such trouble figuring out how to build.

The *Sefat Emet* (5637) offers the following explanation of this Midrashic passage:

Undoubtedly, according to how our teacher Moshe understood all the details of the building of the *menorah*, human capability was insufficient to build it. But Betzalel did not understand as much, and according to his understanding, he made it willfully and with good intentions, for the sake of Heaven.

Moshe, a prophet who received the instructions from God in the heavens, grasped the full meaning and import of the *menorah*, and he therefore did not know how to produce the structure as a practical matter. But Betzalel, who perceived God’s commands not from the “heavenly” perspective of Moshe, but rather from an “earthly,” pragmatic outlook, was able to immediately complete the project. Betzalel was not privy to the sublime, esoteric aspects of the *menorah*, and saw only the concrete commands, and so he proceeded to fulfill them. This project was too difficult for Moshe precisely because he grasped the full spiritual depth underlying the *menorah*, and he found it impossible to translate these layers of meaning into a tangible, physical structure.

According to the *Sefat Emet*, then, this Midrash reminds us that the Torah, while having originated in the heavens, is intended to be practiced and applied in the complex, imperfect realities of our world. If we perceive Torah life as a pristine, idyllic, “heavenly” existence, we will – like Moshe – be unable to “build the *menorah*,” to shine the light of Torah in the darkness of our world. We can successfully implement the laws and principles of the Torah in our lives only if we accept the limitations and complexities of our lives, and recognize that those laws and principles are meant to be applied as best as possible in our imperfect earthly existence. If we insist on perfection, on a pristine, “heavenly” standard, the “*menorah*” will remain unbuilt. We can succeed in bringing the “heavenly” light of Torah into our world only if we strive to shine it as brightly as possible while recognizing that some level of “darkness” will always remain; if we do the very best we can without demanding pristine perfection.

Wednesday

Parashat Beha’alotekha begins with a brief discussion of the *menorah*, the kindling of which is referred to with the verb *a.l.h.*, conjugated here as “*be-ha’alotekha*” – “when you kindle.” This verb, which normally means “rise” or “ascend,” is used in reference to the kindling of the *menorah* also in other contexts (Shemot 25:37, 27:20 and 30:8; Vayikra 24:2).

Rashi, commenting here on the word “*be-ha’alotekha*,” explains that this verb is used to indicate that the candles of the *menorah* must be lit in such a way that “*shalhevet ola mei-eileha*” – “the flame rises on its own.” The source of Rashi’s interpretation is the Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (21a), and Rashi there explains that the flame must be independently steady, without the need for any human intervention after kindling. The Gemara establishes on this basis that the wicks and oils used for the kindling of the *menorah* in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* must be of the type that produce a steady flame which does not flicker and thus does not require any human involvement after its kindling.

Symbolically, this *halakha* has often been viewed as reflecting the essence of religious education. The *menorah* is commonly understood as a symbol of the “light” of Torah, and thus the kindling of the lamps of the *menorah* has been explained as symbolizing the process of education, of using our “flame” to produce new flames by raising and teaching youngsters. The goal of education is that “*shalhevet ola mei-eileha*,” the youngster should become independently motivated and driven to follow the Torah’s commands without having to rely on the teacher’s constant involvement and instruction.

Rav Yechezkel of Shinova, in *Divrei Yechezkel*, suggested an additional symbolic explanation of this *halakha*. He writes that although it is not possible for us to immerse ourselves exclusively in Torah study, given our physical and material needs which we must attend to, nevertheless, we must all strive to have the “flame” of the Torah’s values and teachings “shine” for us throughout the day, at all times. And the way we can do this, the *Divrei Yechezkel* writes, is by “kindling” the “flame” in such a way that it “shines” on its own, even when we are not involved in learning. If we learn with passion, with attention, with reverence, and with a genuine desire to be molded and guided by the Torah’s words, then the “flame” will remain steady throughout the day. Just as the lights of the *menorah* were to shine throughout the night (and, according to some views, throughout the day) despite not being actively lit, similarly, we are to strive to be inspired and guided by the light of the Torah at all times, even when we are not actively engaged in Torah. And this is done by ensuring that our periods of study are substantial, and approached with seriousness, fervor and focus.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Beha’alotekha tells of Moshe’s invitation to “Chovav, the son of Reuel, Moshe’s father-in-law” to join *Benei Yisrael* on their journey from Sinai to the Land of Israel (10:29). The conventional understanding is that “Chovav” is another name for Yitro, who, as we know from earlier in the Torah (Shemot 18:1), was Moshe’s father-in-law. The Ramban comments that converts to Judaism commonly assume a new name after joining the Jewish People, and so Yitro took a new name – Chovav – after leaving Midyan and joining *Benei Yisrael*. Rashi, based on the *Sifrei*, explains that the name “Chovav” refers to the fact that “*chibeiv et ha-Torah*” – Yitro “cherished” the Torah.

The question arises, according to this view, as to why Yitro was present in the Israelite camp at this time. Earlier, in Sefer Shemot (18), we read that Yitro came to visit Moshe and *Benei Yisrael* as they encamped at the “mountain of God” (Shemot 18:5), which refers, presumably, to Mount Sinai. After Yitro’s stay in the Israelite camp, we are told, he returned to his homeland (“*va-yeilekh lo el artzo*” – Shemot 18:27). And yet, according to the conventional reading of the text here in Parashat Beha’alotekha, Yitro was again present in the camp nearly one year later, just before *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Mount Sinai. The Ramban (Shemot 18:1) answers that evidently, Yitro later returned to the Israelite camp, which was not very far from Yitro’s homeland, Midyan. Indeed, as the Ramban notes, Moshe ended up at Mount Sinai while he lived with Yitro and shepherded his flocks (Shemot 3:1), proving that Yitro’s home was in the vicinity of Mount Sinai. It is thus not unreasonable to speculate that although Yitro returned home after visiting *Benei Yisrael* at Sinai, he came again at a later point, while they were still encamped at the mountain.

Another difficulty that the commentators addressed in reference to this verse is the identity of Reuel. Here, Chovav is identified as the son of Reuel, yet in Parashat Shemot (2:18), Reuel is named as the father of Moshe’s wife, Tzipora. Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, answers this question by suggesting that when the Torah refers to Reuel as the father of Tzipora (and her sisters), it actually means that he was her grandfather, and indeed, people sometimes refer to their grandfather as their father. This answer is also given by the Ramban (Shemot 2:16) and Ibn Ezra (Shemot 2:18), who give numerous examples of instances where grandchildren are referred to as children, and grandparents as parents.

An entirely different – and surprising – approach is taken by Ibn Ezra in his commentary here in Parashat Beha’alotekha, where he suggests that the exchange recorded here was not between Moshe and his father-in-law, but rather between Moshe and his brother-in-law. As indicated in Parashat Shemot, Tzipora’s father was named “Reuel,” and it therefore stands to reason, Ibn Ezra writes, that “Chovav, son of Reuel,” whom the Torah mentions here, is Tzipora’s brother. Ibn Ezra then proceeds to propose that this is also Yitro, who is described earlier as having visited *Benei Yisrael*. Although Yitro is referred to in Sefer Shemot (18:1) as “*chotein Moshe*” – “Moshe’s father-in-law” – Ibn Ezra boldly suggests that the word “*chotein*” can also mean “brother-in-law.” Ibn Ezra arrives at this theory based on the fact that Yitro is described as having joined Moshe “in the desert where he encamped” (“*el ha-midbar asher hu choneh sham*” – Shemot 18:5), and here Moshe says to Chovav, “…and you are familiar with our encampment in the desert” (“*yadata chanoteinu ba-midbar*” – 10:31), suggesting that Yitro and Chovav were the same person. Thus, if Chovav was Moshe’s brother-in-law, then Yitro must likewise have been his brother-in-law, and not Moshe’s father-in-law, as is commonly understood.

As noted, in his commentary to Sefer Shemot, Ibn Ezra follows the more conventional reading, that Reuel was Tzipora’s grandfather, and Yitro – who was also known as Chovav – was Moshe’s father-in-law.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the confusion surrounding the brief account in Parashat Beha’alotekha (10:29-32) of Moshe’s exchange with “Chovav, son of Reuel, Moshe’s father-in-law,” just before *Benei Yisrael*’s departure from Mount Sinai, asking Chovav to join them. The conventional understanding, as we saw, is that “Chovav” is another name for Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, with whom we are familiar from earlier sections in the Torah. This reading, however, gives rise to the question of why Yitro here is referred to as the son of Reuel, given that in Sefer Shemot (2:18), Moshe’s wife’s father is called Reuel. Moreover, the Torah tells later in Sefer Shemot (18:27) that Yitro returned to his homeland after his brief visit with *Benei Yisrael* at Sinai. It thus seems difficult to understand why he was again with *Benei Yisrael* at the time they disembarked from Sinai to begin their journey towards the Land of Israel.

In light of these difficulties, a different approach has been suggested, asserting that Chovav and Yitro were not, in fact, the same person. Rather, Chovav was Yitro’s son, or Moshe’s brother-in-law. (Yesterday, we noted Ibn Ezra’s suggestion that Chovav was Moshe’s brother-in-law, and that he was also Yitro; here, we suggest that Yitro was Moshe’s father-in-law, and Chovav was his son.) This theory avoids both questions raised above: Chovav was indeed the son of Reuel, another name for Yitro, as indicated in Sefer Shemot; and although Yitro returned to his homeland after his visit to the Israelite camp, his son, Chovav, remained. Now, when *Benei Yisrael* prepared to journey from Sinai, Moshe turned to his brother-in-law and invited him to join them as they made their way to *Eretz Yisrael*.

According to this reading, when the Torah introduces Chovav as “son of Reuel, Moshe’s father-in-law,” the phrase “Moshe’s father-in-law” modifies Reuel, not Chovav. Reuel is another name for Yitro, who was Moshe’s father-in-law, and Chovav was Reuel’s son.

The difficulty with this interpretation, however, arises from a verse in Sefer Shoftim (4:11) which tells of Chever, a member of the Keini tribe, which descended from Yitro. The verse relates, “Chever, the Keinite, separated from Kayin, among the children of Chovav, Moshe’s father-in-law.” This tribe is described as having descended from “Chovav, Moshe’s father-in-law” – clearly indicating that, as most commentators explain, Chovav was Yitro, Moshe’s father-in-law, not his brother-in-law. In order to maintain the theory postulated above, we would have to read the phrase “Moshe’s father-in-law” in this verse as referring not to Chovav, but rather to Keini, who is mentioned earlier in this verse (“Chever the Keinite”). As we know from earlier in Sefer Shoftim (1:16), Keini was another name for Yitro, and so it could perhaps be suggested that it is Keini – and not Chovav – who is described here as Moshe’s father-in-law.

(Based on Rav Hillel Martzbuch’s [article, “*Mi Ata Chovev Ha-chaviv*?”](https://www.kipa.co.il/%D7%99%D7%94%D7%93%D7%95%D7%AA/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%95%D7%A2/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%94%D7%A2%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%9A/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%94%D7%A2%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%AA%D7%9A-%D7%9E%D7%99-%D7%90%D7%AA%D7%94-%D7%97%D7%95%D7%91%D7%91-%D7%94%D7%97%D7%91%D7%99%D7%91/))

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