

TIMELESS TORAH

BEHA'ALOTECHA : THE LIGHT THAT REFUSES TO GO OUT

Eternal Lights

Parshat Behaalotecha is unique among all the parshiyot of the Torah for the diversity of its narratives. The opening passage of the parshah, however, contains a topic - the lighting of the Menorah - that has already been discussed in several other places and seems to have no particular connection to the current context. Quoting a Midrash, the commentators explain that the Menorah is mentioned in proximity to the *korbanot* of the Nesiim (the princes) at the end of last week's parshah, to address Aharon's emotional turmoil upon seeing the major inauguration ritual in which he did not take part. According to the Midrash, he was comforted by the mitzvah of the Menorah, which would be performed by he and his descendants every day. As the Ramban points out, however, this Midrash cannot be taken literally. Aharon did indeed offer *korbanot* as part of the inauguration service, and in terms of the ongoing Beit HaMikdash service, his responsibilities obviously far surpassed those of anyone else. Rather, the Ramban writes, the Midrash is hinting specifically to the Menorah of the re-inauguration of the Beit HaMikdash in the times of the Chashmonaim, which would be preserved for eternity in the kindling of the Chanukah lights.

According to the Ramban, the Midrash is conveying a crucial idea. In the excitement of any new beginning always lies a certain unease about the fact that this situation will not last forever. Here, in the context of the Mishkan and the Beit HaMikdash, the Midrash is teaching that these great gifts are able to remain forever. The dedication of the Sanctuary was carried out with the Nesiim's offerings, but even when these

would cease to exist, the light of the Menorah, as preserved through the Chanukah miracle, would never fade away.

This idea is mirrored in another episode in this parshah where the verses describe how the *Korban Pesach* was offered for the first time in the desert. This *korban* had a particular significance, the Ramban writes, as it emphasised how imperative it was that the memories of what had transpired in Egypt should not remain with this generation alone. As such, the individuals who were unable to participate in the *korban* on Pesach were profoundly affected, and this was the catalyst for the *Pesach Sheni*, a unique mitzvah that offers a second chance to bring the *Korban Pesach*. Thus, the message of *Pesach Sheni* is that the mitzvot are not given for the here and now, but they offer opportunities that can last forever.

Food for Thought

Towards the end of the parshah, the Torah describes how the people complained that they had not been given meat (Chapter 11). In Egypt, they grumbled, we were able to access vegetables and gather fish from the river, but here in the Wilderness, we are dependent solely on the manna. Rashi notes, however, that the verse states explicitly that when the people left Egypt, they were laden with sheep and cattle (*Shemot* 12), and forty years later, when they finally arrived at the border of Eretz Yisrael, they still had numerous animals (*Bamidbar* 32:1). So, this complaint could only have been a pretext for something else that was bothering them. The Otzar Chaim, quoting the Einayim Yafot, suggests that the answer lies in the people's use of the future tense when they lodged this complaint: '*mi ya'achileinu basar* – who **will** feed us meat' (11:4). This indicates that



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their principal concern was that although they had enough to eat now, they were concerned that tomorrow might be a different story. As the verse states, 'A *tzaddik* eats to his heart's content, but the stomach of the wicked is lacking' (Mishlei 13:25). In other words, their discontent lay in their concern for the future. The response they received, according to this, was incisive. They were instructed, '*Hitkadshu l'machar* – Prepare yourselves for tomorrow' (11:18), meaning that the food they were requesting would arrive the next day. But the word *hitkadshu* is an unusual one to use in this context, as it normally carries the nuance of preparation for spiritual elevation. The suggestion of the Otzar Chaim is that they were being told that instead of worrying about what they would eat the next day, they should consider whether they would be around then altogether! Too often, people fall into the trap of allowing the worries of tomorrow overtake the present. Before entering the cycle of fear for the future, the people were being taught that they must allow themselves to live for today.

Equal Opportunities

Interwoven in this passage of the people's complaints about food is the establishment of the first Sanhedrin: the seventy elders that Moshe gathered to support him in leading the people. The connection of this incident to the episode of the complaints is clear. It was during the course of these events that Moshe expressed frustration over having to lead the people singlehandedly, and Hashem's instruction to him to gather a body of seventy elders was a direct response to this. Two elders - Eldad and Meidad - who were not among the newly-formed *Sanhedrin*, prophesied independently. Yehoshua then suggested to Moshe that this prophecy should be stopped, but Moshe firmly rejected

this proposal, saying that he did not have to champion his own rights and that these people's achievement of prophecy was welcome.

In a majestic piece, Rav Hirsch (d.1888) discusses the profound significance of this short interchange. Firstly, it is instructive to note that the Chizkuni interprets the verses (11:29) to show that although the seventy elders received their inspiration to prophesise via Moshe (11:17), Eldad and Meidad were influenced directly by the Divine spirit. Building on this, Rav Hirsch explains that this episode occurred precisely when, for the first time, spiritual authority had been vested within an independent body. Until now, the ranks of leadership among the nation had been limited to certain Divinely chosen individuals or groups, such as the priesthood or Moshe Rabbeinu himself. Here, a Sanhedrin had been chosen with equal representation of all of the tribes. However, they had been chosen as a group to be led by Moshe, and there could still be a concern that their spiritual authority would lead to a spiritual monopoly. Eldad and Meidad's prophecy at this juncture, together with Moshe's self-effacing response, demonstrated that spiritual aptitude does not depend on a particular vocation; the ultimate aim of Jewish leadership is the democratisation of learning and growth in Torah.

SHELACH LECHA: Choosing Faith When the Path Is Unclear