

to remain in the camp (11:26-29). What happens to them? What is Joshua's reaction? Why do you think that he reacts in such a way? What is Moshe's response? What do you think that he meant?



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The weekly Haftarah Commentary
By Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Senior CY Faculty in Talmud and Midrash,
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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Beha'alotekha

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Annual (Numbers 8:1-12:16): Etz Hayim p. 816-835; Hertz p. 605-619

Triennial (Numbers 8:1-9:14): Etz Hayim p. 816-821; Hertz p. 605-609

Haftarah (Zecharia 2:14-4:7): Etz Hayim p. 836-839; Hertz p. 620-622

What's Preferable - Freedom or Free Fish?

Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb, CY Faculty and Coordinator, Torah Sparks

The story is told of a young monk who joins a silent monastery. The rules are simple, the abbot tells him. "You can speak two words every ten years." After ten years the young monk says "Bed hard." Ten years later, "Food bad." After 30 years he tells the abbot, "I quit." The senior monk looks at him and says, "I'm not surprised. You've been complaining ever since you got here." We can pretty safely assume the monk in the story was not Jewish – his first complaint is not about the food.

For me *Baha'alotkha* is the saddest *parashah* in the Torah. It begins gloriously - the Menorah is prepared, the silver trumpets readied for the departure from Sinai, the Fiery Cloud is in place to lead them to the land "the Lord spoke of." The first ten chapters of Numbers have the air of a new beginning, all running to plan. The Divine plan, according to Rashi (10:29 and 10:32), was to bring them to Israel "in three days."

But then it all collapsed, like a giant soufflé. While the 39 year delay in the desert is usually attributed to the episode of the spies next week in *Shlah leha* (ch 14), Rashi (quoting the Midrash) says it began with the *mitonanim*, the “complainers” (11:1). The people then demand meat and recall, with the tone of ‘the good old days,’ “the fish which we ate free in Egypt, the cucumbers and melons, the leeks, onions and garlic” (11:5). Actually they had made similar complaints shortly after leaving Egypt (Ex. 16:3): “In Egypt we had plenty of meat and bread.” Complaining about the food, early and often, is a very old Jewish custom; no waiting ten or twenty years.

The recollection of the time in Egypt is astonishing; the experience there – slavery, *avodat parech* (hard labor), brutal taskmasters – is reduced to food in abundance or even free. Nostalgia is memory after the facts have been deleted. Psychologists say that the tendency to “brighten” the past is actually positive for our emotional wellbeing.

But one word is particularly striking – “the fish we ate *hinam* – **free**.” Several commentators explain it literally: fish were plentiful in Nile; the Egyptians would feed the slaves fish so they'd be strong for work.

Rashi rejects that idea – if the Egyptians didn't give them straw for bricks it was hardly likely they would let them eat fish free. *Hinam* for Rashi means *hinam min hamitsvot*, free from the commandments (11:5). At Sinai the children of Israel received the Torah, the commandments upon which the life and conduct of the Jewish people are based. The Midrash tells how the Israelites “departed from Sinai” – they fled from *the message of Sinai*, Torah and *mistvot*, like children running from school when the bell rings. *Am Yisrael* in those days was subservient to the material side of life – slaves to bread and circuses, or, perhaps, to Sushi and the football games. *We're happy, let's go back to Egypt; don't bother us with Torah*. Are things so different today?

Rebbe Elazar Ben Azaria articulates the equilibrium at the heart of Judaism (Pirkei Avot 3:21) – *im ein kemach ein torah*, if there is no flour (material sustenance) there is no Torah, and *vice versa*. We have to include and appreciate both. Judaism is neither ascetic, as some religions, ancient and modern, nor pleasure-obsessed, as so much of western culture today. Striking that balance is the challenge the Jews faced at Sinai and that we face today.

A Vort for Parashat Beha'alotekha

Rabbi Daniel Goldfarb, CY Faculty

God describes Moses as “trusted [*ne'eman*] within My house (Num 12:7).” R' Nochum of Shtepinetch (Ukraine, 19th C), son of R' Israel of Rizhin, said once of his brother, the tsaddik R' Dovid Moshe of Chortkov, “when he holds a *Sefer Tehilim* (Book of Psalms) in his hands and starts to recite *Tehilim*, the Holy One says to him, ‘Dovid Moshe, my son, the whole world is in your hands; do with it as you wish’. If He would give **me** the world,” continued R' Nochum, “I would know what I would do with it. But my brother is such a trusted servant; he returns it to God just as it is.”

Table Talk

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty

In this Parasha we feel that we are in the desert, touching on the end of the Mishkan narratives on one hand, and the preparations for going into the land on the other.

- 1) Following the exciting dedication of the Mishkan in last week's Parasha in which the 12 leaders of the tribes brought gifts, we open with lighting instruction for the Menorah, the 7 candle lamp in the Mishkan by Aaron (8:1-4). Why do you think that this section was placed here?
- 2) The Leviim (Levites) have their own ceremony of initiation into their role in the Mishkan. In that ceremony the People of Israel will place their hands on the Leviim (8:9-19). What do you think this symbolizes?
- 3) 2 silver trumpets were used in the desert and later in the land of Israel (10:1-10). What was their purpose in each of these places? What was the difference in use in each location? Why?
- 4) As the people walk a 3-day journey in the desert, complaints start to be heard. God gets angry and a fire consumes the edge of the camp (11:1-3). Who do you think is located at the edge? Rashi offers 2 readings: The lowest or the highest in society. What would each reading tell us about the situation of the people?
- 5) 70 people are chosen to help Moshe with his work as a leader and invited to the Tent of Meeting to receive prophecy. However, 2 choose