

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

have been extraordinarily difficult for those living far away, and we find many attempts in Devarim itself to ameliorate the difficulty of this seismic shift. For instance, if one lives far from the Mikdash (the Temple), one may eat meat not offered as a sacrifice (Devarim 12:20-28). One need not bring tithes to the Mikdash, but rather exchange them for money to be brought or sent to Jerusalem (Devarim 14:22-26). But when it comes to offering the Pesah, the demand to bring the Pesah to the Mikdash is unmitigated in Devarim (16:1-7).

The passage in this week's parashah offers both a solution to this problem but also an exhortation. On the one hand, those who miss the first opportunity to celebrate Pesach are not automatically cut off from their people. They are given a second chance. However, Bemidbar shares Devarim's insistence that every Israelite offer the sacrifice. Being away from the center of worship or being impure is a reason for delay, but only a temporary one.

The innovation of the book of Devarim, the centralization of worship, is in a sense mirrored by the revolutions Jews have experienced over the last century. Judaism went from a religion whose center was largely unreachable, to a center that is almost never more than a day's travel away. This transition has been traumatic for Judaism and for many Jews, and has raised and continues to raise many crises for Jews who do not live close to the center. And like the book of Devarim, there is a voice that offers no compromise in its insistence that Jews be in Israel. Those who do not show up are cut off, no excuses accepted. And of course, there remains a voice like that which we read in Sefer Shemot (the book of Exodus), which does not portray any centralization of worship. The Pesah can be offered at any place of worship. But there is also the middle position of Bemidbar. Jews must make a pilgrimage to the center of Jewish life. If they intentionally do not, they will eventually be cut off from their people. But we understand that they cannot always do so. Like the impurity and distance mentioned as preventing people from offering the Pesah in the book of Bemidbar, people may not be able to come to Israel for religious and practical reasons. But at a certain point remaining part of the Jewish people demands a real encounter with the Jewish state, one that can only take place in the land of Israel itself.

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TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Beha'alotekha

June 22, 2019 | 19 Sivan 5779

Annual (Numbers 8:1-12:16): Etz Hayim p. 816; Hertz p. 605
 Triennial (Numbers 10:35-12:16): Etz Hayim p. 826; Hertz p. 613
 Haftarah (Zecharia 2:14-4:7): Etz Hayim p. 836; Hertz p. 620

Pesach Sheni: Calendars, Rigidity & Flexibility

Dr. Joshua Kulp, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

Scholars have described the possibility of “making up” for missing the first opportunity to celebrate Pesach as the most perplexing and shocking law in the entire Torah. Rituals must be performed at their proper time, and there is no other case in the Torah in which an individual or community who fails to do so is given another opportunity. Indeed, the law is not only surprising in the context of the Torah, but it also clashes with the norms of surrounding cultures. There is a passage in Hittite law that sounds remarkably similar to the circumstances in which the Pesach Sheni discussion arose, but rule in a completely opposite manner: “You who (are) the temple officials: If you do not perform the festivals at the time of the festivals; ... (or) if the right time for doing the festival (has) arrived, and he who is to do it comes to you . . . and he seizes your knees, (saying) ‘The harvests (are) before me,’ or a marriage or a journey or some other matter. ‘Let me off. Let that matter finish for me, and when that matter is finished for me, I will do the festival thus’: Do not do according to the wishes of (that) man.” Why then does Sefer Bemidbar (the Book of Numbers) give Israelites the ability to offer the Pesach sacrifice a month late?

Simeon Chavel, a Bible professor at the University of Chicago Divinity School, posits that the background to the Torah's puzzling law is the fact that most Israelites/Jews during the period did not live close enough to Jerusalem to travel there for the festivals. Sefer Devarim (the Book of Deuteronomy) revolutionized Israelite religion by demanding that all sacrifices be brought to Jerusalem instead of being offered at local altars. Such a radical change in Israelite religion would

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Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center for Conservative Judaism

Agron Street 8 • P. O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265

Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org

D'var Haftarah: When God Awakens

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

People are often confounded when reading the Tanakh on account of its choice of language to describe God's interaction with the world. For instance, this week's haftarah describes the response of the nations of the world when God will come to rescue His people: "Hush, all flesh before the Lord, for He has stirred from his Holy abode" (2:17 Alter translation). Zechariah uses the term *ne'or* - which means to stir, rise up, or awaken. But what could it mean for the nations of the world for God to "wake up"? And what does it say about God?

Targum Yonatan, the Jewish Aramaic translation of the Prophets, renders this verse: "All of the wicked will be destroyed from before the Lord when God reveals Himself from His sacred dwelling peace." God's stirring/waking means that the nations of the world will be punished; it is not so much that they will be silent when God awakens, but that God will silence them. Two French contemporaries of Rashi take a similar approach. Rabbi Yosef Kara comments: "that God will awaken from the Heavens to exact punishment on the nations [who have mistreated Israel]." Rabbi Eliezer from Beaugency offers a similar explanation, "that He will awaken to save His people."

But unlike these commentators who take the wording of Zechariah at face value, the Targum seems uncomfortable speaking about God as "waking up." It uses the language of God "revealing" Himself instead. Rabbi David Kimche (13th century Provence) echoes this when he writes: "This [verse] is [expressed] by way of a parable. It is **like** a person who awakens from his sleep." In this same vein, the linguist and philosopher, Rabbi Yosef Ibn Kaspi (14th century Provence) invokes the famous rabbinic principle that "*Dibrah Torah kileshon bnai adam*" when he writes, "[This is expressed by way of the expression] – 'the Torah speaks the way people speak', namely, it is **as if** he was asleep and then awoke from his sleep, for most certainly, 'The Guardian of Israel neither sleeps nor slumbers' (Psalms 21:3-4)." For Ibn Kaspi, the contradiction can only be resolved by understanding Zechariah figuratively.

Since language arises out of human experience, it is necessarily limited in its ability to describe God. We are forced to use metaphors that, if taken literally, can lead to deep theological misunderstanding. We are the inheritors of a tradition that recognized already many many centuries ago that there is a gap between God and how we, and our holy texts, talk about God. May we merit to continue in their path.

Parashat Beha'alotekha Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

In this parashah 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. With all that, we get a glimpse of the difficulties of life in the desert.

- 1) Moshe is told to prepare trumpets of silver (10:1-10). Among their various uses, they are to be blown "on the days of your rejoicing, on your appointed holidays, and on the start of a new moon." While we are familiar with holidays and new moon (Rosh Chodesh) from the Torah, what might "days of our rejoicing" be referring to? (If you wish, look at Ibn Ezra on 10:10.)
- 2) In this Parasha we hear about the travel instructions: the people are to travel when the cloud moves on and leads them, otherwise, they will stay where they are (9:15-23). In 10:11-28 we are told that they "marched first" according to God's instructions to Moshe. Indeed, when was the last time that they traveled? (Think back through the story since they left Egypt.)
- 3) The Children of Israel complained about the food; they want meat and remember the free fish, cucumbers, and onions that they ate in Egypt (11:4-6). Why do you think that their nostalgic memories of Egypt have to do with food?
- 4) In a move to help Moshe with his leadership role, 70 elders are gathered at the Tent of Meeting and given the prophecy. 2 additional people begin to prophesize while in the camp. Joshua, Moshe servant, is furious and demands that they be contained. Moshe responds with a wish 'may all the people of the LORD be prophets!' (11:24-29.) What are the 2 approaches here to Moshe's role?
- 5) Miriam and Aaron, Moshe's siblings, speak about him in a manner that is perceived as negative. God rebukes them, and Miriam is punished with tzara'at. Moshe prays for his sister "God, pray, heal her, pray!" (chapter 12). Why do you think that Moshe spoke so briefly? What might we learn from his prayer?

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