

Parashat BeHa'halothekha

פרשת בהעלותך – יזמ"ה תשס"ח

The Sages determined that the Book of Numbers (*BaMidbar*) marks a separation between light and darkness. In this spirit, this week's *parasha* (portion) can be seen as the portion of "twilight".

This week's Torah reading opens with the following verses:

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה, אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. דַּבֵּר, אֶל-אַהֲרֹן, וְאָמַרְתָּ, אֵלָיו: בְּהֶעֱלִיתָ, אֶת-הַנֵּרוֹת, אֶל-מוֹל פְּנֵי הַמְנוֹרָה,
וְאִירוּ שִׁבְעַת הַנֵּרוֹת

And the LORD spoke unto Moses, saying: 'Speak unto Aaron, and say unto him: When thou lightest the lamps, the seven lamps shall give light in front of the candlestick.'

Thus, the portion opens with light – transparent and clear, symbolizing goodness and blessing, uniting all by illuminating everything. In contrast, Bible scholar Rabbi Professor Feivel Meltzer writes of the evil divisiveness of darkness – the opposite of light.

This portion is not only the "**Parashat HaShavua**" (weekly portion) but also a "**Parashat D'rachim**" (crossroads) for the nation in the desert. It tells of the transition from the clear, forceful and goal-oriented movement towards the future to a place filled with gloom and anger, tears and dissent. A vast divide separates the light from the grumbling darkness; and yet, they are in fact, two sides of the same coin – unity and divisiveness, order and chaos, consolidation and disintegration. These opposing sides characterize the nation of Israel throughout its journey - from its desert womb to its early formative stages.

In the first part of this week's Torah reading and especially in Chapter 10, we sense unity:

וַיְהִי בְנִסְעַ הָאָרֶץ, וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה: קוּמָה יְהוָה, וְנִפְצוּ אֹיְבֶיךָ, וְנִנְסוּ מִשַּׁנְאֶיךָ, מִפְּנֵיךָ...

And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moses said: 'Rise up, O LORD, and let Thine enemies be scattered; and let them that hate Thee flee before Thee.'

The nation - marching together in solidarity and guided by proper leadership – is able to remain strong, to keep a steady eye on its target and to make its presence and its peace-seeking and life-affirming message known to all.

The *Midrash* associated with this portion (*Bamidbar Raba*) tells that when King Solomon built the Holy Temple in Jerusalem he made the windows narrow within and wide without, so that its light should emanate to the outside and illuminate the world. The windows serve as

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loudspeakers, "announcing" the light radiating from the very heart of the Jewish people, the Ark of the Covenant, to the world.

In Chapter 11, we witness the darker side of the nation. We begin to sense the gloom; dark clouds begin to form on the horizon, masking the bright and illuminating sky. The nation loses its way and its leaders begin to falter.

וְהָאִסְּפָסֶּף אֲשֶׁר בְּקִרְבּוֹ, הִתְאָוִי תֹאנָה; וַיִּשְׁבוּ וַיִּבְכוּ, גַּם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וַיֹּאמְרוּ, מִי יֹאכְלֵנוּ בָּשָׂר. זָכַרְנוּ, אֶת-הַדָּגָה, אֲשֶׁר-נֹאכַל בְּמִצְרַיִם, חֲנָם; אֶת הַקִּשְׁאִים, וְאֶת הָאֲבֹטְחִים, וְאֶת-הַחֲצִיר וְאֶת-הַבְּצָלִים, וְאֶת-הַשּׁוּמִים.

And the mixed multitude that was among them fell a lusting; and the children of Israel also wept on their part, and said: 'Would that we were given flesh to eat! We remember the fish, which we were wont to eat in Egypt for nought; the cucumbers, and the melons, and the leeks, and the onions, and the garlic;

These complaints – albeit understandable and natural given the situation – pose a difficult problem for the reader. Until now, we have been pleasantly enjoying the reading and suddenly we begin to feel uncomfortable. Our ancestors are lusting after meat and we are not all that comfortable hearing this. Hearing them reminisce about how good they had it; we, accustomed to obstacles in our path, cannot help but cringe. Who among us loves garlic? Cucumbers? Onions? Give us a pita with labane and za'atar and we would be happy.

The dispersed people, poised in the direction of the land of Canaan, asks: "Who will save us from hunger? Who will give us shelter from the cold? Who will provide us with bread? Who will provide us with light in the darkness?" The older among them answer "In the fleshpots of Egypt". However, the younger, more forward-thinking among them declare: "We will – with our own hard work. We have the power to effect change; to save and to redeem. We will return the seven-branched *Menora* to its rightful place. We will make it a symbol – a vessel by which we will spread the light to the entire world".

Shabbat Shalom

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