

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

frenzied night leaving Egypt—tent stakes being pulled up, the hubbub of sorting and packing, animals anxiously stirring and people rushing around every which way. People crowding together, craning their necks to see the cloud, to figure out which direction it was moving, how fast it was going, maybe even stampeding in an effort not to be left behind. On its own, merely trying to move with God's cloud seems chaotic.

So God gives some addition instructions:

Make for yourself two silver trumpets. You will make them hammered, and they will be for you to call the assembly together and to signal the movement of the camps. (Numbers 10:2, translation mine)

The Torah goes on to detail how different trumpet blasts signified different things—when the whole community gathers, when the leaders gather, and how to move. The trumpets coordinate which parts of the camp moved, creating order where there might have been chaos.

The midrash in Sifrei Bamidbar points out that trumpets teach us that we need both the Divine signal to move and the human act of organizing and communicating amongst ourselves. We might be tempted to think God's direct command is enough, but we would be wrong.

Like B'nei Yisrael, we too are journeying through a wilderness. And like B'nei Yisrael, we too need both human organization and Divine guidance to journey through the desert together.

Just as God's clouds lifting off the mishkan were an unmistakable sign for the Israelites, so too our moral compass must drive us to action now. It must be obvious to us that human life is of inestimable value and that therefore the devaluation of black lives and the continued murder of black men at the hands of police is unacceptable.

Like the ancient Israelites, we too need trumpets: handmade, human tools that direct our energy and movement.

We have the trumpet of Oral Torah: The deep, nuanced discussions of the midrash and Gemara that call us to examine an issue from every possible perspective, while challenging us to live out our highest values.



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TORAH SPARKS

Beha'alotcha

June 13, 2020 | Sivan 21 5780

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Triennial I (Numbers 8:1-9:14) Etz Hayyim, p. 816
Haftarah I (Zechariah 2:14-4:7) Etz Hayyim, p. 837

Divine and Human Agency

Eliana Mastrangelo

CY Student 2019-2020, Ziegler Rabbinical Student

This week, we encounter B'nei Yisrael at a turning point. Having rushed out of Egypt, fled across the Red Sea and camped at Sinai where we received Torah and built the Mishkan, we are now ready to move forward. In *Parshat Beha'alotkha* we are beginning our march through the desert, towards the culmination of redemption—a free, justly organized society in the Promised Land.

Just as God guided us with a cloud in our flight from Egypt, so too, God will guide us through the desert:

And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp. (Numbers 9:17, JPS translation)

However, the system of the cloud ascending and descending from the Mishkan presents a programmatic difficulty. Imagine it! The scene probably would look something like that

Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center

Agron Street 8 • P. O. Box 7456 • Jerusalem, Israel 94265
Tel: 972-2-625-6386 • israel@uscj.org • uscj.org • conservativeyeshiva.org

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D'var Haftarah: Challenged by a Heroine

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives

The sages viewed Biblical stories as more than just sacred recollections of the history of the Jewish people. The stories and the heroic figures encountered in them also played an important didactic role in shaping the lives of the generations after them.

Sometimes the hero or heroine has a character flaw which we are meant to notice and therefore avoid in our own lives. On rare occasions the heroine rises up from her ignoble status to achieve greatness. A character such as this is, on the one hand, a source of great inspiration, providing a model for anyone challenged by the possibility to change. On the other hand, such a person could also be used to shame those whose behavior has become a source of embarrassment.

Rahab, the harlot, is an example of a heroine from this later category. She saves the spies sent by Joshua and recognizes and acknowledges their God and the significance of His actions in the world: "I know that the Lord has given the country to you, because dread of you has fallen upon us, and all of the inhabitants are quaking before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the waters of the Sea of Reeds for you when you left Egypt...When we heard about it, we lost heart, and no man had any more spirit left because of you; for the Lord your God is the only God in the heaven above and the earth below." (verses 9-11)

The downside of such exemplary behavior and faith in a person of such common origins is felt acutely by people of stature who veer from the path of integrity. The following midrash takes the people of Israel to task for not living up to the standard of behavior set by Rahab: Said Rabbi Abba bar Kahana: "You find that whatever was written about Israel's reproachful behavior is written in praise of Rahab. With regard to Rahab it is written: 'And now, take an oath, I ask, to me, by the Lord, that I have done mercy to you' (Joshua 2: 12). And with regard to Israel, it is written: 'Therefore they take an oath in vain' (Jeremiah 5:2). With regard to Rahab, it is written: 'And you will keep alive my father and mother' (Joshua 2:13). With regard to Israel: 'In you have they ridiculed father and mother' (Ezekiel 22:7) With regard to Rahab it is written: 'And she brought them up to the roof' (Joshua 2:6) With regard to Israel: 'Those who bow down on the roof to the host of the heaven' (Zephaniah 1:5). With regard to Rahab it is written: 'And she hid them in stalks of flax' (Joshua 2:6) With regard to Israel: 'Who say to a piece of wood you are my father' (Jer. 2:27) In regard to Rahab it is written: 'And she said [to the spies]: Go up to the mountain' (Joshua 2:16) With regard to Israel: 'They sacrifice on the tops of the mountains' (Hosea 4:13) In regard to Rahab it is written: 'You will give me a true token' (Joshua 2:13) With regard to Israel: 'Truth they will not speak' (Jeremiah 9:4). Thus whatever is written with respect to Israel's reproachful behavior is written in praise of Rahab. (Adapted from Pesikta deRav Kahana 13:4 Mandelbaum ed. pp. 227-8)

Rahab's behavior, then, has presented an enormous challenge to those who should have stood firm in their loyalty to God and the Torah. One can only hope that her challenge will be met.

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Free Lunches?

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty

Text: Bamidbar 11:4-6

(4) The riffraff in their midst felt gluttonous craving; and the Israelites, too, again wept and said, "Who will feed us meat?!" (5) We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. (6) Now our throats are dry, There is nothing except the Manna to look to!"

- As the Israelites begin traveling (they have left Mount Sinai after spending a year there) they complain about food, despite having Manna. Why do you think that their complaints are about food? What role does food play in national and personal memory?
- Why do you think that they are reminiscing about fish and vegetables when they complain about the lack of meat?
- What is the difficulty in their claim of "free food" in Egypt? Why do you think that they do not speak of the Manna as being "free food"?

Commentary: Rashi Bamidbar 11:5

[We remember the fish that] we used to eat free in Egypt – If you say that they meant that the Egyptians gave them fish for free, does it not state (Exodus 5:18): [Go and work] for there shall no straw be given you"? Now, if they did not give them straw for free, would they have given them fish for free?! – What then is the meaning of the word "free"? It means: free from the Mitzvot (commandments).

- Why does Rashi not believe that the food was free?
- What does "free" mean according to Rashi? In the eyes of the people, what was the cost of the free food from God?
- According to this reading, how would you describe the crisis the Israelites were experiencing? Why do you think that it expressed itself through food?

Commentary Ramban Bamidbar 11:5

...By its simple meaning: The Egyptian fishermen would enslave them to pull up the fish caught in the nets, and they would give them of the fish, as is the custom of fishermen... or they were the king's workers... and they would be given... of the king's ration small fish that are considered worthless in Egypt.

- What is the narrative that Ramban gives to the "free food" that the Israelites seem to remember?

- What might happen to an event when it moves from historic recounting to a memory?
- Ramban opens by stating “by its simple meaning”. Why? (Hint: Which of these commentators was aware of the other?)