

THE TRUE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

The parsha begins:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying, "Speak to Aharon and tell him, 'In your kindling of the lights over against the menorah ...' " (BaMidbar 8:1)

This section prompts Rashi to ask:

Why is the section of the menorah juxtaposed with the section dealing with the offerings of the princes?

... And to answer:

Because when Aharon saw the dedication of the princes, he became distraught because he was not included with them, neither he nor his tribe. The Holy One, Blessed is He said, "By your life! Yours will be greater than theirs since you will light and prepare the menorah." (Rashi)

Aharon HaKohen, jealous?

Not likely. If anyone was selfless and content with his lot in life, it was Aharon. A "pursuer of peace," he was not one to look at someone else's portion and grow jealous. In fact, we see this in the Torah, all the way back before the redemption from Egypt, when G-d commanded Moshe to take charge of the exodus (Moshe had worried that Aharon would be offended, having been overlooked by G-d):

G-d became angry with Moshe and said ... "Behold, he [Aharon] is going out now to greet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart." (Shemos 4:14)

And not as you believe, that he will be angry with you because you have attained a high position. (Rashi)

If so, then what caused Aharon to become concerned over his tribe's exclusion from the prince's inauguration? The answer is, it was his personal involvement in the episode of the golden calf. After all, it was Aharon who had called out:

"Pull off the golden pendants, which are in the ears of your wives, of your sons, and of your daughters, and bring them to me" ... And he [Aharon] took them from their hand, and formed it with a

graving tool, and he made a molten calf. (Shemos 32:2)

Though all of his intentions had been pure, trying only to hold off the Erev Rav (Mixed Multitude) long enough to give Moshe a chance to return to the camp and restore order, still, it had been his hand that had worked the gold.

Furthermore, the best of intentions count for very little when they lead to national disaster; there is no such thing as an "innocent bystander" when it comes to Divine Providence. His involvement, therefore, could not be viewed as being accidental, and now, after he and his entire tribe was left out of the inauguration of the princes, he wondered if G-d still had not forgiven him for his deed.

G-d's answer to Aharon's apprehension was: the menorah. The menorah was made of one piece of gold molded together, as had been the golden calf. Also, like the golden calf, the menorah represented the passion of the people. However, unlike the golden calf, this passion, realized through the burning flames that slanted toward the middle one (which burned heavenward), was directed to G-d.

Furthermore, whereas the golden calf was meant to act as a replacement for G-d, the menorah was designed to testify to His existence, and His eternal love of the Jewish people:

"... Outside the cloth partition of the [Ark of] Testimony."

G-d needs the light (of the menorah)? For the entire 40-year period that the Jewish people traveled in the desert, they did so by His light (and not by the light of the menorah). Rather, (the light of the menorah) was for "testimony," so that everyone in the world would know that the Divine Presence resided among the Jewish people. What was the testimony? That the western candle contained as much oil as the others, yet others were kindled from it, and its oil never diminished. (Shabbos 22b)

This was not unlike Aharon himself, who was a mortal being like those around him; yet all of the Jewish people drew strength and inspiration from him, and his was never diminished. The following (which occurs later in the parsha) about Moshe could easily be applied to Aharon as well:

What was Moshe like at that moment? Like a light that is placed in a candle stick at which everybody lights his own candle, and yet its illuminating power is not diminished. (Rashi, BaMidbar 11:17)

Furthermore, the verse does not say, "when the lights are kindled," but rather it says, "in your kindling of the lights," implying that Aharon was personally being credited for the "igniting" of this passion, and the channeling of it toward G-d. This is the essence of the role of the kohen, and this was what Aharon HaKohen himself always tried to do.

Therefore, through the menorah Aharon received Divine confirmation from G-d that he had indeed been completely forgiven for his role in the golden calf. As a result, he could also rest assured that his tribe's omission from the inauguration was in no way a sign of Divine rejection. After all, it had been the Leviim who had rallied around Moshe after he had returned to the sight of the golden calf,

and took revenge against the perpetrators.

Furthermore, immediately after the mitzvah to light the menorah in this week's parsha comes the section dealing with the setting aside and inauguration of the Leviim themselves before the eyes of the entire nation. As a result, all of Aharon's fears about Divine anger against him or his tribe were permanently cast aside, and he was able to resume his role as the spiritual head of the Jewish people with complete confidence and support from Heaven.

Shabbos Day:

When the Ark traveled forward, Moshe said, "Rise up, Eternal, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let them who hate You flee before You ..." (BaMidbar 10:35)

These words are familiar words because we say them in prayer just before we open the Ark to remove the Sefer Torah on Torah reading days. What may not be so familiar is that these words constitute an individual book of the Sefer Torah itself, dividing the book of BaMidbar into two sections, making the "Five Books of Moses" in reality, "The Seven Books of Moses"!

Furthermore, this section is set apart from the section proceeding it and the one that comes after it by inverted "nuns" as the Talmud states:

The rabbis taught: When the Aron traveled ... Moshe spoke this parsha and God made markers (i.e., an upside down nun) above and below it, to indicate that this is not its place ... Rebi Shimon ben Gamliel said: In the future this parsha will be taken from here and written in its proper place. Why was it written here? To separate between the first punishment (10:33) and the second punishment (11:1). (Shabbos 115b)

Why the letter nun, and why inverted?

The letter nun numerically is equal to 50, and if one counts from the parsha "And the Tent of Meeting shall travel ..." (2:17), where our parsha actually belongs until where it is actually found, there are fifty sections (marked by open spaces). Hence, according to Moshav Zekainim, the Torah delayed this section by fifty parshios.

Furthermore, had the Jewish people not been anxious to leave Mt. Sinai, as the following verse indicated they had been (the inverted nun indicates that the Jewish people had turned their backs on G-d):

And they traveled from the Mount of G-d three days' journey ... (BaMidbar 10:33)

... Then they would have immediately gone and crossed the Jordan river, which is 50 amos wide, into Eretz Yisroel, rather than wander the desert an additional 39 years as they had.

However, the truth is, the inverted nun is not only telling us what went wrong, and when it went wrong, but why it went wrong as well. This is because the letter "nun," and the fifty it represents always alludes to the "Nun Sha'arei Binah," or, "The Fifty Gates of Understanding," as referred to in the Talmud:

The world was created with Fifty Gates of Understanding ... (Rosh Hashanah 21b)

As we just experienced ourselves, Shavuot and the giving of Torah occurs each year on the fiftieth day of the Omer, which we begin to count the second day of Pesach. And as we have mentioned before, it is a number, like the number eight, that alludes to a supernatural reality, one in which G-d deals with the Jewish people above nature by performing miracles on our behalf.

The "Fifty Gates" can also be viewed as fifty "rungs" on a spiritual, intellectual ladder that span the distance between our lowest level of soul, the Nefesh, and the higher level, the Neshama, which is said to be in the "mouth of G-d." Hence, the Fifty Gates are spiritual thresholds one must cross on the way to an increasingly more sublime relationship with the Creator.

Of the five levels of soul, only these two begin with the letter "nun." According to the Nefesh HaChaim, the ladder that Ya'akov saw when he lay down to sleep after fleeing his brother, Eisav (Bereishis 28:10), represented his own soul (the bottom of the ladder rested at the level of Nefesh, while the top part reached the level of Neshama; the ladder was the section of soul called "Ruach" which spanned the distance between the two).

Indeed, the word "neshama" can be broken into two parts: the letter "nun" and the word "shama," which means "there." It is as if to say that the word "neshama" says "nun," that is, the Fifty Gates of Understanding can be found "there," at the top of that spiritual ladder.

Applying this analogy to the nuns of this week's parsha we arrive at the following explanation. For fifty days as the Jewish people journeyed to Mt. Sinai, they had climbed that "ladder" on the way to spiritual perfection in order to receive Torah. However, after a year and the incident of the golden calf, they had departed with a less than graceful exit.

Though it is true that they had been expected to move on to Eretz Yisroel, there is a "leaving," and then there is a "leaving." There is a leaving where one knows they must move on, though they would love to remain where they are. In such a case, the person physically changes his location, but spiritually, he remains forever attached to the place he left behind. He carries the experience with him wherever he travels.

And then there is the leaving where the person is so anxious to leave the place he is presently at, that, even though he has yet to physically depart, mentally, he is long gone. That may be a positive approach when it comes to leaving behind an anti-spiritual atmosphere. However, it is an extremely damaging approach and attitude when one is leaving G-d and Har Sinai.

Hence, the inverted nun is indicating that when the Jewish people left Har Sinai, they had been

descending the ladder, not ascending it. And it is for this reason that all the problems about to occur in the upcoming parshios do in fact happen. In life, it is not always a question of whether or not we are still on the ladder, inasmuch as one of in which direction we are going, and why.

Is our nun right-side up, or upside down?

Seudos Shlishi:

G-d said to Moshe, "Gather for Me seventy elders of Israel, whom you know to be elders of the people, and bailiffs over them, and bring them to the Appointed Tent, and let them stand there with you. I will come down and speak with you there, and I will save some of the spirit that rests upon you, and will put it upon them ..." (BaMidbar 11:16)

As Moshe had requested, G-d widened the circle of prophecy to include seventy elders. Moshe had complained to G-d that the burden that was the Jewish nation was too much for him to handle alone, and G-d complied by adding the seventy elders to his "committee."

What is important to point out is who these people were. As Rashi points out (11:16), they were the Jews, who in the midst of despair and Egyptian slavery risked their lives and took physical beatings themselves to spare their brethren increased suffering. At a time of complete hopelessness, when a weaker individual might have abandoned his fellow man to preserve his own life, these individuals did just the opposite.

Did they know that one day they would be rewarded like this? No. Yet, there they were, just years later since leaving Egyptian slavery, standing next to Moshe and receiving Divine prophecy. The tables had completely turned on them, for the better, and they had reaped the rewards of their self-sacrifice.

It is an important lesson for life. At times of crises when solutions seem to be lacking, and in moments of despair when no light seems to exist at the end of the tunnel, there is a tragic tendency to break down and put our own interests above those of our fellow Jews. However, this week's parsha proves that, in a G-d-run world, it's not worth it; for, no matter how chaotic life becomes today, "tomorrow," G-d will sort things out, and He has an impeccable memory for what we have done in the past. Then, the good things we have done come back to reward us; the poor performances of the past come back to haunt us.

That's one lesson to learn from this episode; the other lesson is less obvious.

The day the seventy Elders were chosen was a day of great celebration for the Jewish people. All had gathered for what was an inauguration ceremony, including Moshe's sister, Miriam, who upon

seeing the festivities had commented:

"How fortunate are the wives of these Elders who have been granted prophecy!"

However, Moshe's own wife Tziporah who had been there too remarked, "Quite the contrary! They are going to be quite unhappy, for now their husbands will be separate from them!" (Rashi, BaMidbar 11:4).

According to the Midrash, Miriam had already noticed that Tziporah, had neglected her physical appearance. Now she knew why: Moshe no longer paid much attention to his wife, being consumed by the responsibility of running the nation. As well, Moshe, in order to be able to receive prophecy at a moment's notice, had to be in a constant state of spiritual purity, which prompted him to live alone.

Forever looking out for the welfare of others, Miriam sought out Aharon to deal with the situation. However, though Miriam had merely been looking out for Moshe and Tziporah, instead, her complaints about Moshe did not go unnoticed and instead brought upon Divine wrath. By the time the "clouds had cleared," Miriam had been inflicted with tza'aras, the leprosy that comes for speaking loshon hara.

It is always amazing how what seems like an innocuous statement to us can have such long reaching and dramatic ramifications that can literally blow up in our faces. Often, what is clear in the eyes of one is confusing and even irritating in the eyes of another.

Furthermore, it is likewise amazing how what seems like an injustice in our eyes, to G-d, is just the opposite. As human beings, emotions often can cloud our vision and twist our perspectives until we end up fighting for causes as if they are "do-or-die," when in fact, in the ultimate scheme of things, they don't count for very much at all. As one rabbi put it, "Do you think for one moment that Tziporah would give up her position next to Moshe in the World-to-Come for a little extra closeness in This World?"

In the end, Tziporah must have felt bad for making her statement to Miriam in the first place after she saw what it caused, and Miriam must have wondered how she could ever have misjudged the wisdom of her brother, the greatest prophet that had ever lived. However, in the very end, we are left with a very important lesson about the need to be careful about the context within which we make statements, and about the need to judge others to the side of merit.

Melave Malkah:

Though Miriam had erred in speaking loshon hara about her brother, especially since he was also the leader of the nation, it still resulted in an important opportunity to sing the praises of the greatest prophet that ever lived. First the Torah comments:

Moshe was very humble, more than anyone else on the face of the earth ... (BaMidbar 12:3)

And then G-d Himself added:

" ... My servant Moshe is not so (i.e., like other prophets), who is faithful in all My house. With him I speak mouth-to-mouth, in a plain vision and not in riddles; he perceives the 'appearance' of G-d ..." (BaMidbar 12:7)

The Talmud adds its own comment:

When Moshe was born, he filled the house with light. It says here, "And she [Yocheved] saw that he was good" (Shemos 2:2), and there it says [by the creation of the light of creation], "G-d saw the light, that it was good..." (Bereishis 1:3). (Sota 12a)

Hence, from the start, Moshe was unique. Aside from having a unique history, he had also had a unique birth, already glowing with the original light of creation. The Talmud states:

The world was created with Fifty Gates of Understanding, forty-nine of which were given to Moshe. (Rosh Hashanah 21b)

And he had had a unique death as well, for he had died on Har Nebo (nun, bais, vav), which can mean: nun-bo, that is, "fifty on it," as if to say that at his death he had crossed the final threshold of the fiftieth gate to complete unity with G-d.

As will be discussed later in Parashas Chukas, Moshe had been far greater than simply a leader par excellence. Moshe himself was a threshold of sorts; because of his special nature, he possessed the ability to lead the Jewish people to completely rectify creation, and to be Moshiach himself. In fact, according to Kabbalah, even when Moshiach does eventually come, he will possess Moshe's soul!

As the Midrash indicates, Moshe's inherent greatness lay in the fact that his soul emanated from a very high source. As a result, he had been born a fitting conduit to pass on the Torah from G-d to the Jewish people, a task that, theoretically speaking, should be impossible to do. However, Moshe did do it, and for this reason Torah is called "Toras Moshe," for it is the word of G-d that had come down to man through Moshe, the most "faithful servant" in the house of G-d (according to the Talmud Yerushalmi, even the questions cheder children would ask their rebi were revealed to Moshe!)

This is what the psalmist had in mind when he wrote:

Happy are those who sit Your house; may they forever praise You, Selah! (Tehillim 84:5)

Happy is the people for whom this is so (shekacha lo; shin, chuf, chuf, heh). (Tehillim 114:15)

It is brought down that the word "shekacha" is an allusion to Moshe Rabbeinu (300+20+20+5=345=Moshe); "lo" itself is an allusion to the Primordial Light of creation, with which Moshe was born and which he emanated and shared through Torah (lo = 30+6=36, the number of hours that this light shone for in the Garden of Eden before being hidden).

Happy is the people that possessed a Moshe!

It is an additional idea to think about when saying this special prayer, which we say three times daily. A prayer which the Talmud says guarantees a person a portion in the World-to-Come. After all, when it is all said and done, will it not have been Moshe who had provided us with our unique "passport" to Eternity?

Ashreinu, mah tov chelkeinu ... (Happy are we; how good is our portion ...)

Have a great Shabbos,

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