

NOT TO BE TAKEN LIGHT-LY

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying, "Speak to Aharon and say to him, 'When you set up the lamps, the seven lamps should give light ...'" (Bamidbar 8:1)

The Divine Providence behind the chapter numbers of the Torah always amazes me. True, the system of chapter numbers was devised by the non-Jews to facilitate quick referencing during the days of the debates with Torah scholars. However, they tried to stay close to the traditional breaks in the Torah, and, the fact that they were unaware of the significance of their numbering doesn't mean that G-d wasn't involved in the process behind the scenes.

Thus, very often, the chapter number of a parshah is coincidentally connected to the matter of the parshah on a numerical level. For example, this week's parshah is BeHa'alo'sechah, which happens to be the eighth parshah in Sefer Bamidbar, a number which is intimately tied to the eight-day holiday of Chanukah. What makes this significant is that, according to the Ramban, the mitzvah of menorah at the beginning of this week's parshah is a direct allusion to the future holiday of Chanukah!

Furthermore, if you were to count the parshios from the beginning of the Torah until this week's parshah, you would arrive at the number thirty-six--the number of candles we light during the eight days of Chanukah. It is also the number of hours that the Hidden Light of creation served Adam in the Garden of Eden before he was banished.

I have mentioned all of this by way of introduction, because Parashas BeHa'alo'sechah is the first one to follow the holiday of Shavuos (at least in Eretz Yisroel)--the "Time of the Giving of Our Torah." And, though, the period between Shavuos and the seventeenth day of Tammuz--a fast day in our calendar and the start of the "Three Weeks"--may seem insignificant (unlike the build-up during the Omer-Period between Pesach and Shavuos), we will now discuss why this is not so, to better understand the pitfalls and opportunities of this very Kabbalistic time, and how this week's parshah addresses these issues.

According to Tradition, if the period between Pesach and Shavuos represented a build-up of light and positive spiritual influence, then the period between Shavuos and Shivas Esrai b'Tammuz

represented a remission of light, symbolized by Moshe's ascension up Mt. Sinai the day following the giving of the Ten Commandments. He had gone up the mountain to receive the rest of the Torah on behalf of the Jewish people, but it was also a sign that the Divine Light that everyone had experience on the sixth day of Sivan had withdrawn somewhat on the seventh day of Sivan--paving the way for the possibility of a golden calf.

Aharon HaKohen, the main character at the beginning of this week's parshah played a central role in the disastrous episode of the golden calf. In fact, as the commentators point out, it was Aharon's remorse about being involved with the golden calf that caused his concern in this week's parshah about not being included in the previous inauguration of the Mishkan by the princes. The mitzvah of the menorah was meant to be taken as a sign of Divine forgiveness for his involvement.

In fact, the entire period of time from the seventh of Sivan until just after Tisha B'Av can be broken up into three phases, each resulting in less Divine Light: the seventh of Sivan through the seventeenth of Tammuz; the eighteenth of Tammuz until Rosh Chodesh Av, and, Rosh Chodesh Av through Tisha B'Av. Most major disasters affecting the Jewish people have occurred during the Three Weeks, and principally on Tisha B'Av.

This is why this is an important period of time to increase Torah study and zealousness in mitzvos. In other words, "BeHa'alosechah!" Just as the menorah symbolizes light in a darkened world, so too does our commitment to Torah and mitzvos at this time symbolize light at a time that G-d is pulling His light back.

And, as Rashi explains, "BeHa'alosechah" means making sure that our light can stand on its own, for this is the only way to counteract the forces of creation that naturally move toward darkness and chaos. The more serious we take Torah and the fulfillment of mitzvos, which is revealed by our approach to both, the stronger and brighter our personal flame will be, and the role we play in bringing about redemption at such a propitious time.

Shabbos Day:

Moshe said to Chovav ben Re-uel the Midianite, the father-in-law of Moshe, Travel with us to the place of which G-d said, 'I will give it to you' ... He told him, I will not go, but I will go to my own land ... (Bamidbar 10:29)

As Rashi explains, the posuk is referring to Yisro, who converted to Judaism back in Parashas Beshallah. According to Rashi, it was now, after the Jews were prepared to leave Mt. Sinai and journey to Eretz Yisroel that Yisro broke rank and headed back to Midian, in spite of Moshe's pleas to the contrary. According to some, Yisro wanted to bring some of his relatives under the wings of the Divine Presence as well.

What is interesting to point out is that Moshe never mentions the place to which the nation is headed, calling it neither Eretz Canaan or Eretz Yisroel. Moshe only identifies their final destination as "the place of which G-d said ..." It is an obvious omission.

Perhaps the reason for this is as Rashi explains:

[Moshe said to Yisro,] 'I beg you, do not leave us now so people should not say, Yisro did not convert out of love for Judaism, for, in the beginning he thought that he too would have a portion in the land, and now that he has learned otherwise, he has gone his own way.' (Rashi, Bamidbar 10:31)

Perhaps Moshe's statement took this law into account, and meant the following: What difference does it make, ultimately, whether or not you get a portion in the land or not, if the entire land is the King's Palace? Don't feel left out just because you are convert, for, what counts the most is that you are part of the people and are living on holy soil, a land of which G-d spoke.

Perhaps. But perhaps Moshe is making a deeper statement about the final destination of a Jew--any Jew, be he a born Jew or a convert.

In other words, what Moshe was impressing upon Yisro was that even a physical portion in Eretz Yisroel, in This World, is a temporary reality. The true, ultimate destination of the Jew is G-d Himself, and His word. The Talmud even says that the Eretz Yisroel of the World-to-Come will be divided up differently than it was in Yehoshua's time. Hence, wherever a Jew goes, Moshe intimated, and wherever he settles, it must always be in the direction of G-d Himself.

Perhaps it is precisely this idea that gave Yisro the confidence to return to Midian, in spite of Moshe's plea, to a desert devoid of Torah and spirituality. Knowing that G-d is the final resting station of all Jews wherever they may be, he felt strong enough to achieve this in Midian as well. The destination of the Jew is above nature ... above physical borders.

However, Moshe's point is well-taken, and evidenced throughout history: Eretz Yisroel remains to be the place to achieve this, because it is the land that G-d spoke about specifically, and therefore, the best place to live within the word of G-d.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

They traveled from the Mount of G-d three-days journey, and the Ark of the Covenant traveled ahead of them three-days journey to search out a resting place for them. (Bamidbar 10:33)

They miraculously traveled three-days distance in one day, because The Holy One, Blessed is He, wanted to bring them right to the land immediately. (Rashi)

Based upon the previous d'var Torah, we can understand the urgency of bringing the Jewish people to Eretz Yisroel as soon as possible. They weren't just going to the Promised Land, the land flowing

with milk and honey; they were going to physical and spiritual completion, and when it comes to this, every delay is worth far more than seconds, hours, or days.

Hence, the Jewish people came tantalizing close to bringing in the era of Moshiach, because that is what would have happened had they entire nation crossed the border together. According to tradition, had the nation simply followed G-d's lead, then Moshe would have remained their leader, would have led them into the land, and then would have become Moshiach then and there. In fact, then we'd all be sitting in Gan Aiden now, instead of different parts of a disintegrating world, and peace would reign forever!

Alas, it was not to be, and three days have become three millennia! Since that time, 3,310 years have passed almost to the day (the left Mt. Sinai on the 20th day of Iyar--thirty-six days after the first and last Pesach in the desert; Bamidbar 9:1). The straight path has become a winding one, first for forty years through the Sinai desert, and later, through almost every country in the civilized world.

It also led to the death of Moshe Rabbeinu, and the last chance for a single individual to rectify the sin of Adam HaRishon. After Moshe's death, only the entire nation could bring Moshiach early, or, history could bring him at the last possible date.

Though we may look at the wandering in the desert as a small piece of history from the Jewish past, in truth, it is not so. In reality, the journey did not end when Yehoshua crossed the Jordan river forty years after leaving Egypt. In fact, it still hasn't ended, as the subsequent exiles into foreign lands have proven. For all we know, we may those desert travelers, poised historically to bring that long journey to a close once-and-for-all. Physically, we may be scattered all over the world; spiritually, and historically, we may be at the border of the Final Redemption.

Let's not make the same mistakes we made in the past.

Melave Malkah:

For seven days, Miriam remained quarantined outside the camp, and the people did not move until Miriam was able to return home. (Bamidbar 12:15)

This, of course, was Miriam's punishment for speaking loshon hara about her brother, Moshe. The Midrash makes it clear that Miriam spoke with Moshe's best interest in mind, and on behalf of her sister-in-law, Moshe's wife, Tzipporah. However, her complaints about Moshe still constituted loshon hara, and she was denied political immunity (even the sister of Moshe was treated as any other Jew with respect to the laws of loshon hara, suffering tzara'as as a result).

This was another example of a fall from grace. Miriam was the one who was responsible for the birth of Moshe, because it was she who convinced her parents to remarry in Egypt and have children after

Paroah decreed death for all the male-born children. The first child Amram and Yocheved gave birth to was Moshe himself.

And it was Miriam who watched from the bulrushes as the baby Moshe floated helplessly on the Nile river towards the daughter of Paroah. Thus, it was in her merit that the miraculous well of water followed the Jewish people around in the desert for forty years, constantly replenishing their life-saving water supply.

And yet, in this week's parshah, Miriam not only had to suffer the physical consequence of speaking loшон hara, but she was also responsible for holding up the entire Jewish nation from moving forward on their way to Eretz Yisroel. What demerit! What humiliation!

Hence, this whole episode, as bizarre as it may seem, is an important lesson about leaders and leadership. Like many traits in life, the drive to benefit others can be a double-edged sword. Miriam, like all the righteous people of Jewish history, rarely thought of herself. She wasn't after riches, fame, or glory; she just wanted to serve G-d and her people. If so, then what went wrong?

What went wrong is that, sometimes one's zealousness to do the right thing can backfire, often with disastrous results. People can become so involved in a cause that other important issues can fall by the wayside at important times. Issues, such as in Miriam's case, being verbally critical about others in violation of the laws of loшон hara.

In fact, when it comes to leadership, the laws of loшон hara are the hardest to observe, because it is difficult, as a leader, not to talk about other people. Furthermore, in furthering the cause one often feels justified in speaking disparagingly about others--for the sake of the cause, of course. It is a tough call, and in the end, a big test.

However, it is a test that every Jewish leader must live up to, because if one does not, then even the cause suffers in the end. Not only does loшон hara result in personal humiliation for the leadership itself, but can, in the end, cause the overall mission to become reversed as well, undoing much of the good that proper leadership had brought about.

Have a great Shabbos,

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