

Some Comments on Beha'alotkha

Rabbi Eliot Malomet June 18, 2022 19 Sivan 5782

במדבר ח':י"ד והבדלת את הלויים מתוך בני ישראל והיו לי הלויים:

Numbers 8:14 Thus you shall set the Levites apart from the Israelites, and the Levites shall be Mine. The Levites played a central role in the life of Israel. In the desert they were the "roadies" for the Sanctuary. When the Temple was established, they performed as singers and musicians and were essential for the maintenance and operation of the building. The Levites were supposed to be teachers of Torah throughout Israel but it is not clear how successful they were. By the time the Judeans return from Babylon, very few knew Torah and a class of proto-Sages emerge, Ezra the most prominent among them.

במדבר י':י"א ויהי בשנה השנית בחודש השני בעשרים בחודש נעלה הענן מעל משכן העדות:

Numbers 10:11 In the second year, on the twentieth day of the second month, the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle of the Pact...Recall that Bemidbar begins on the first day of the second month of the second year and now it's the twentieth of that month. (It's been fourteen days since we read that in shul, so this is the only place in the Jewish year where the reading almost matches the chronology of the text!). Now that everyone has been counted and assigned to their duties, the people is, at last, ready to move. Take a moment to imagine how the people related to the cloud. If you are looking at the cloud from a distance, it's quite hard to discern if it's moving. Would they have needed special 'cloud scouts' and then runners to tell the people?

במדבר י':ל"ג ויסעו מחר ה' דרך שלשת ימים וארון ברית ה' נסע לפניהם דרך שלשת ימים לתור להם מגוהה:

Numbers 10:33 They marched from the mountain of God a distance of three days. The Ark of the Covenant of ה traveled in front of them on that three days' journey to seek out a resting place for them; Commentators have pointed out that in a journey, sometimes you are going to a destination and sometimes you are going from a point of embarkation. Here the people are going from. What does that suggest? Consider: they have been at Mount Sinai for over a year. A lot has taken place there. They are eager to leave, so they are going from. While we know their destination, the text doesn't specify it here. Why?

במדבר י"א:א' ויהי העם כמתאננים רע באזני ה' וישמע ה' ויחר אפו ותבער-כם אש ה' ותאכל בקצה המחנה:

Numbers 11:1 The people took to complaining bitterly before ה' heard and was incensed: a fire of ה' broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp. It's been only three days. If we charted out where everything changes, it's here. 23rd day of the 2nd month. Not a happy day.

במדבר י"א:י"א ויאמר משה אלהי' למה הרעת לעבדך ולמה לא-מצאתי חן בעיניך לשום את-משא כלי-העם הזה עלי: Numbers 11:11 And Moses said to God, "Why have You brought harm to Your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor, that You have laid the burden of all this people upon me? The translation doesn't capture the total pathos of frustration. Careful readers will note that this is not the first time Moses uses the words למה הרעת. (Go back to Exodus 5:22)

שמות ה':כ"ב וישב משה אלהי' ויאמר אדוני למה הרעתה לעם הזה למה זה שלחתני:

Then Moses returned to ה' and said, "O my lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? There, Moses is speaking on behalf of the people. Here, he is speaking on behalf of himself. We regard Moses as our greatest prophet. But we have to take a moment to appreciate how deeply human he is. Read this:

במדבר י"א:ט"ו ואם-ככה אה-עשה לי הרגני נא הרג אם-מצאתי חן בעיניך ואל-אראה ברעתי:

Numbers 11:15 If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness!" And it's only day three.

במדבר י"א:ט"ו ויאמר ה' אל-משה אספה-לי שבועים איש מזמני ישראל אשר ידעת כיהם זמני העם ושטרינו ולקחת אתם אלי-אהל מועד והתייצבו שם עמך:

Numbers 11:16 Then God said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy of Israel's elders of whom you have experience as elders and officers of the people, and bring them to the Tent of Meeting and let them take their place there with you. The elders already exist as a group and if we go back to Yitro, there have already been some attempts to organize a judicial and administrative structure for the people. Here though, there is a recognition that beyond a formal organization, there needs to be a greater spiritual presence of God among the people. The gathering of the seventy is intended to engage them not as

administrators but as extraordinary individuals who, touched by prophecy, can help the ordinary people mediate their anguish. The extent to which this works throughout the desert experience is, of course, debatable, but the intent is that with more people who have a direct experience of God in the form of prophecy, the better off Moses will be able to convey God's will to the people. Note also that among the people chosen to have this experience are the **שוטרים-the officers**. When was the last time we saw them? Well, during the period of Israel's enslavement. In Exodus 5:6-19 (look it up) Pharaoh engages the **שוטרים-officers** to facilitate the back-breaking work and to inflict even more difficulty on the people. Could it be that here, they are being rehabilitated? Imagine, the freed people have in their midst, individuals who were agents of the oppressor. How awful would that have been! If these **שוטרים-officers** are the same as the ones in Egypt, the message is that these same people are now being radically transformed from agents of Pharaoh to agents of God.

במדבר י"א:כ' עד | חדש ימים עד אשר יצא מאפכם והיה לכם לזרה ועו בני מאסתם אתה' אשר בקרבכם ותבקו לפניו לאמר למה זה יצאנו ממצרים:

Numbers 11:20 *but a whole month, until it comes out of your nostrils and becomes loathsome to you. For you have had utter contempt for God who is among you, by whining before [God] and saying, 'Oh, why did we ever leave Egypt!'*" The people want meat. Moses is exasperated and turns to God. God says basically, *They want meat? I'm going to give them meat until it comes out of their noses!* Why does God speak this way? We could point to one word: **מאסתם**, which means **contempt**. We have seen that word before at the end of Vayikra 26:15 (look it up) **ואם-בְּהִקְטִי מְאִסוּ** - *And if you have contempt for My laws...* and we recall what will happen then. Contempt seems to elicit the harshest reactions from God. God loves the people, honors His promise to the ancestors, redeems them from slavery, ordains them as his agents to humanity, makes a covenant with them, gives them a set of laws with which they can create a more perfect society, enables them to have the instrumentality of His presence with them always, and on and on, and what do the people want? Meat. What they are saying is that they don't want the hardship that comes with freedom. That rejection becomes contempt.

Having promised to deal with the meat problem God now turns to the leadership problem. The seventy are brought to the tent and then:

במדבר י"א:כ"ה ויגד ה' | בענן ויגבר אליו ויאצל מן-הרוח אשר עליו וישון על-שבעים איש הזקנים ויהי כנזח עליהם הרוח ויתנבאו ולא יספו:

Numbers 11:25 *And God came down in a cloud and spoke to him, And God extended some of the rushing-spirit that was upon him and put it on the seventy men, the elders; and it was, when the spirit rested on them that they ranted-like-prophets, but did not continue. Or they did not stop.* According to some, this prophetic experience was a momentary event. According to others, it was a lasting phenomenon. Of course you can say, it was a momentary event that had lasting effects. Two of the individuals who experienced prophecy, Eldad and Medad, evidently were still in this moment of prophetic ecstasy. A boy runs and tells this to Moses. And then sensing that they are a threat...

במדבר י"א:כ"ח ויען יהושע בן-נון משרת משה מבחריו ויאמר אדני משה קלאם:

Numbers 11:28 *And Joshua son of Nun, Moses' attendant from his youth, spoke up and said, "My lord Moses, restrain them!"* To which Moses then replies:

במדבר י"א:כ"ט ויאמר לו משה המקנא אתה לי ומי יסון כלי-עם ה' גבאים כיי-יתן ה' את-רוחו עליהם:

Numbers 11:29 *But Moses said to him: Are you zealous for me? O would that all the people of God were prophets, that God would put the rush-of-his spirit upon them!* Hardly threatened, Moses sees this as a great moment. Unlike other models of leadership driven by ego and megalomania, Moses has the great gift of humility, recognizing that if more people had access to the spirit of God, the more God's presence would dwell in the people. What could be bad about that? S.R. Hirsch comments: *Moses' answer to Joshua is the ultimate example for all teachers and leaders of Israel to follow, that their highest achievement will be manifest when all of their followers are superfluous. Such that all elements of the people will be able to attain such a great spiritual level that they will no longer be dependent on teachers and leaders!* Therein lies the paradox of Jewish life. On the one hand, we need teachers and leaders; on the other hand, the job of teachers and leaders is, by this framing, to make their job obsolete! Thoughts?

שבת שלום!