

Parashat Beha'alotcha

“On the twentieth day of the second month of the second year, the cloud was taken up from over the tabernacle of the testimony; and the people of Israel moved out in stages from the Sinai Desert. The cloud stopped in the Pa’ran Desert. So they set out on their first journey” (Bamidbar 10:11-13). Thus it was that after almost a year since they arrived at Sinai our people set off on their journey towards Eretz Yisrael. For the past twelve months they had camped around the mountain as Hashem gave them time to adjust to the demands of their new Torah lifestyles. Indeed, for a people who had lived among and assimilated with pagans for four hundred years we can bet that there was much for them to learn. Taking on Torah required a radical rearrangement of their lives. The idea, for example, of resting on the Sabbath would no doubt have been quite alien to them and we can imagine them being quite twitchy as the hours of apparent idleness passed by on those first few Shabbats. It must have seemed quite counter intuitive, as it so often does for us, that we might actually be more productive in life with scheduled rest periods rather than busy working at something 24/7. In fact the Torah records that many of our people couldn’t restrain themselves for very long and, contrary to the mitzvot, they went out looking for manna on the seventh day. “On the sixth day they gathered twice as much bread, two ‘omers per person; and all the community leaders came and reported to Moshe. He told them, “This is what Adonai has said: ‘Tomorrow is a holy Shabbat for Adonai. Bake what you want to bake; boil what you want to boil; and whatever is left over, set aside and keep for the morning.’” They set it aside till morning, as Moshe had ordered; and it didn’t rot or have worms. Moshe said, “Today, eat that; because today is a Shabbat for Adonai — today you won’t find it in the field. Gather it six days, but the seventh day is the Shabbat — on that day there won’t be any.” However, on the seventh day, some of the people went out to gather and found none. Adonai said to Moshe, “How long will you refuse to observe my mitzvot and teachings? Look, Adonai has given you the Shabbat. This is why he is providing bread for two days on the sixth day. Each of you, stay where you are; no one is to leave his place on the seventh day.” So the people rested on the seventh day.” As they say, old habits are the hardest to break. Indeed, as with them so with us. Such is the lifetime of challenge that we all face in adjusting to living a Torah lifestyle. Of course in this regard I don’t just mean the challenge of learning what to do on a particular holy day, how many times and in which direction you should wave your lulav for instance. These things certainly take time but are relatively easy to learn. The hardest challenge that we face, whether we were born Jewish or not, is in understanding and responding to the deeper challenges of Torah, of living lives of peace and justice. In fact our prophets reveal that this is a challenge that our people, however well versed they had become over centuries in the minutiae of ceremonial law, in for example, exactly how and well to offer the various sacrifices, continued to struggle to adapt their lives to millennia after they had left the Sinai desert. As we read in Yirmeyahu 7:22, “Thus says Adonai-Tzva’ot, the God of Isra’el: “You may as well eat the meat of your burnt offerings along with that of your sacrifices. For I didn’t speak to your ancestors or give them orders concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. Rather, what I did order them was this: ‘Pay attention to what I say. Then I will be your God, and you will be my people. In

Parashat Beha'alotcha

everything, live according to the way that I order you, so that things will go well for you.' But they neither listened nor paid attention, but lived according to their own plans, in the stubbornness of their evil hearts, thus going backward and not forward. You have done this from the day your ancestors came out of Egypt until today. Even though I sent you all my servants the prophets, sending them time after time, they would not listen or pay attention to me, but stiffened their necks; they did worse than their ancestors." Moreover, "'Oh yes, they seek me day after day and [claim to] delight in knowing my ways. As if they were an upright nation that had not abandoned the rulings of their God, they ask me for just rulings and [claim] to take pleasure in closeness to God, [asking,] 'Why should we fast, if you don't see? Why mortify ourselves, if you don't notice?' "Here is my answer: when you fast, you go about doing whatever you like, while keeping your labourers hard at work. Your fasts lead to quarrelling and fighting, to lashing out with violent blows. On a day like today, fasting like yours will not make your voice heard on high. "Is this the sort of fast I want, a day when a person mortifies himself? Is the object to hang your head like a reed and spread sackcloth and ashes under yourself? Is this what you call a fast, a day that pleases Adonai? "Here is the sort of fast I want — releasing those unjustly bound, untying the thongs of the yoke, letting the oppressed go free, breaking every yoke, sharing your food with the hungry, taking the homeless poor into your house, clothing the naked when you see them, fulfilling your duty to your kinsmen!"

When we read passages like this we see just how hard it is to be Torah observant. The idea that Torah observance is all about what you put in your mouth, wearing a tallit or what and how you celebrate holy days is hopelessly shallow. For true Torah observance, as Yeshua instructs is, runs far deeper than this and involves nothing less than the gradual transformation of the inner self: "Woe to you hypocritical Torah-teachers and P'rushim! You pay your tithes of mint, dill and cumin; but you have neglected the weightier matters of the Torah — justice, mercy, trust. These are the things you should have attended to — without neglecting the others! Blind guides! — straining out a gnat, meanwhile swallowing a camel! "Woe to you hypocritical Torah-teachers and P'rushim! You clean the outside of the cup and the dish, but inside they are full of robbery and self-indulgence. Blind Parush! First clean the inside of the cup, so that the outside may be clean too. "Woe to you hypocritical Torah-teachers and P'rushim! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look fine on the outside but inside are full of dead people's bones and all kinds of rotteness. Likewise, you appear to people from the outside to be good and honest, but inwardly you are full of hypocrisy and far from Torah." Harsh words indeed, but sadly necessary, apparently for the P'rushim and Torah Teachers, and no doubt also for us. What this teaching does is impress upon us the need to see Torah observance in a new and deeper light. When many people come into contact with Judaism for the first time they are enamoured with the obvious external trappings of what is on the surface assumed to be Torah observance, i.e. precisely the things we have been speaking about such as keeping putting on a Tallit, celebrating a new set of holy days with great traditions. But if that is all that Torah observance consists of in your experience then, as the Tanakh so often puts it, the real challenge of Torah is not these

Parashat Beha'alotcha

external outward observances, but the observance and inward transformation of the heart. As the Deuteronomist records Moshe as saying, "Therefore, circumcise the foreskin of your heart; and don't be stiff-necked any longer! For Adonai your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, mighty and awesome God, who has no favourites and accepts no bribes. He secures justice for the orphan and the widow; he loves the foreigner, giving him food and clothing. Therefore you are to love the foreigner, since you were foreigners in the land of Egypt. You are to fear Adonai your God, serve him, cling to him and swear by his name." See how according to this passage the so-called circumcision of heart will lead to imitatio dei. Torah observance therefore leads not just to holy days and other outward observances but instead to "justice for the orphan and widow". The orphan and widow are much referred to in both the Tanakh and Messianic Writings and stand metaphorically for those who cannot help themselves and who by virtue of their marginalised and precarious position within society are likely to be abused. The truly Torah observant and the Torah observant society takes care of such people and protects them just as God is said to protect them. Moreover, since God has no favourites and accepts no bribes it also stands to reason that Torah observance is also about working to make sure that there is equality of opportunity for everyone - that the world is truly a level playing field. Equally, the Lord loves the foreigner and gives him food and clothing. The plight of the foreigner or refugee is said to be particularly dear to the God of Israel and this is therefore also to be of concern to the Torah observant. Indeed, it is a mark of Torah observance not just to grudgingly tolerate the presence of the foreigner or refugee but 'you are to love the foreigner.' This means extending to him or her the very same privileges that are the preserve of the native born. Hashem allows no room for prejudice in the heart of the Torah observant. Since all of this goes far beyond most people's limited ideas of what is meant by Torah observance we can better appreciate the lifelong struggle that those who seek to be Torah observant embark upon - not just with a society that may resist or merely pay lip service to these high principles, but with oneself. The task of recognising, challenging and uprooting prejudice within the human heart is a daunting one. As we read in Yirmeyahu 17:9, ""The heart is more deceitful than anything else and mortally sick. Who can fathom it?" Most of us live in a state of constant denial about ourselves. That much is evident when we read Yirmeyahu 17:9 back to back with Mishlei 21:2, "A person may think their own ways are right, but the LORD weighs the heart." Our tendency to persuade ourselves that our thoughts and actions are pure and righteous is a problem in itself when not accompanied with a hearty dose of humility. Indeed, it is precisely this lack of humility that has led over many millennia to the perpetration of the most appalling abuses by 'righteous' people. In fact there is perhaps nothing more dangerous, nothing more inimitable in the eyes of Hashem, than the person who is convinced of the purity and righteousness of his or her own thoughts and actions. As Hitler himself wrote in Mein Kampf, "Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord." Really Adolf? When properly practised the Torah engenders humility; we should always keep the door our hearts and minds open to the possibility that we may be wrong and the other person may be in the right. We should understand that sincerity and conviction are not guarantors of righteousness.

Parashat Beha'alotcha

The challenge of conforming our lives to Torah is therefore not an easy one. In this sense the journey of our people through the wilderness is truly metaphorical. No sooner had they set off from Sinai than, so we are told, they began to complain about the hardships of the way. As we read, (Bamidbar 11:1), "But the people began complaining about their hardships to Adonai." They not only grew greedier for an easy life but they began to dream of the apparent freedoms that they had once enjoyed while in Egypt. They may have been slaves in Egypt at least there they had "meat", the "fish" that they caught for free in the River Nile and the juicy thirst quenching vegetables like "cucumbers" and the savoury delights of "leeks," "onions" and "garlic". At least the food that they had in Egypt tasted good, they complained. But "not we're withering away, we have nothing to eat but this man." If we read between the lines of this complaint we hear the pain of a people who had expected much more from their freedom. We hear the pain of their present discomfort and their disillusionment at project Promised Land. We hear the thought in their complaints that perhaps this Torah thing wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. It was all too much hard work!

Perhaps they felt that this lifestyle had been missold? After all, religious people continue to miss sell the life of faith don't they? Much evangelical Christian preaching promises that life in relationship with God is all floating on clouds and bouncing on the sweet marshmallows of His blessing. They promise that Yeshua is the answer to all your problems, including paying the utilities bills. Your computer has a virus? No problem for Yeshua! Simply pray, lay hands on it and cast it out in Yeshua's Name. They promise that every problem will be solved, as Tommy Cooper would say, 'just like that'! And if your problem isn't solved and your pressing need isn't met? If the overdue electricity bill still remains unpaid then, well, the fault is yours because you haven't believed enough. After all, didn't Yeshua said that faith moves mountains? Many believers are consequently caught up in a pernicious cycle of guilt and failure because their life just doesn't pan out in the way we are told it should. And then come the health, wealth, prosperity teachers making money out of people's guilt and sense of failure, selling all kinds of merchandise that promise to explain how you're doing faith all wrong and prostituting their patented secret of how to do faith right. No wonder they're rich! They shamelessly exploit people's feelings of disappointment, guilt and sense of failure because they were miss-sold the gospel which conflated relationship with God with the temporal blessings. And that is precisely the point of our portion. We may ask why life had to be so hard as our people shlepped across the desert to the Promised Land? Why, couldn't Hashem, with all His power, have caused the desert to blossom around them, cushioning each sandalled step with a bed of grass? Why weren't weren't they all whisked off with a magic carpet to the land of milk and honey? Why did He allow them to suffer? Because, as Moshe explained, "You are to remember everything of the way in which Adonai led you these forty years in the desert, humbling and testing you in order to know what was in your heart — whether you would obey his mitzvot or not. He humbled you, allowing you to become hungry, and then fed you with man, which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, to

Parashat Beha'alotcha

make you understand that a person does not live on food alone but on everything that comes from the mouth of Adonai.”

The people's journey through the wilderness stands as a metaphor of the Torah observant life, and that life can be very hard indeed. It is not for the faint hearted because the changing the heart is precisely the point of the journey and issues of the heart are the most difficult to resolve. The grand hope however for those who are brave enough to step out upon this difficult journey will be worth it. Our goal, as symbolised by the Promised Land, is to live in peace with God, with oneself and with one's neighbour, to establish the harmony envisaged by the prophet. "The wolf will live with the lamb; the leopard lie down with the kid; calf, young lion and fattened lamb together, with a little child to lead them. Cow and bear will feed together, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. An infant will play on a cobra's hole, a toddler put his hand in a viper's nest. They will not hurt or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain, for the earth will be as full of the knowledge of Adonai as water covering the sea."