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Loneliness and Faith

I have long been intrigued by one passage in this week's parsha. After a lengthy stay in the Sinai desert, the people are about to begin the second part of their journey. They are no longer travelling *from* but travelling *to*. They are no longer escaping from Egypt; they are journeying toward the Promised Land.

The Torah inserts a long preface to this story: it takes the first ten chapters of Bamidbar. The people are counted. They are gathered, tribe by tribe, around the Tabernacle, in the order in which they are going to march. Preparations are made to purify the camp. Silver trumpets are made to assemble the people and to give them the signal to move on. Then finally the journey begins.

What follows is a momentous anti-climax. First there is an unspecified complaint (Num. 11:1-3). Then we read: "The rabble with them began to crave other food, and again the Israelites started wailing and said, "If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish we ate in Egypt at no cost—also the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic. But now we

have lost our appetite; we never see anything but this manna!" (Num. 11:4-6).

The people seem to have forgotten that in Egypt they had been slaves, oppressed, their male children killed, and that they had cried out to be freed by God. The memory Jewish tradition has preserved of the food they ate in Egypt was the bread of affliction and the taste of bitterness, not meat and fish. As for their remark that they ate the food at no cost, it did cost them something: their liberty.

There was something monstrous about this behaviour of the people and it induced in Moses what today we would call a breakdown:

He asked the Lord, "Why have you brought this trouble on Your servant? What have I done to displease You that You put the burden of all these people on me? Did I conceive all these people? Did I give them birth? ... I cannot carry all these people by myself; the burden is too heavy for me. If this is how You are going to treat me, please go ahead and kill me—if I have found favour in Your eyes—and do not let me face my own ruin." (Num. 11:11-15)

This was the lowest point in Moses' career. The Torah does not tell us directly what was happening to him, but we can infer it from God's reply. He tells him to appoint seventy elders who would share the burden of leadership. Hence we must deduce that Moses was suffering from lack of companionship. He had become the lonely man of faith.

He was not the only person in Tanach who felt so alone that he prayed to die. So did Elijah when Jezebel issued a warrant for his arrest and death after his confrontation with the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 19:4). So did Jeremiah when the people repeatedly failed to heed his warnings (Jer. 20:14-18). So did Jonah when God forgave the people of Nineveh,

seemingly making nonsense of his warning that in forty days the city would be destroyed (Jon. 4:1-3). The Prophets felt alone and unheard. They carried a heavy burden of solitude. They felt they could not go on.

Few books explore this territory more profoundly than Psalms. Time and again we hear King David's despair, as he in Shakespeare's words, "all alone beweepe my outcast state":

I am worn out from my groaning.

*All night long I flood my bed with weeping
and drench my couch with tears. (Ps. 6:6)*

*How long, Lord? Will You forget me forever?
How long will You hide Your face from me? (Ps. 13:1-2)*

*My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?
Why are You so far from saving me so far from my cries of anguish? (Ps. 22:2)*

*Out of the depths I cry to You, Lord ...
(Ps. 130:1)*

And there are many more psalms in a similar vein.

Something similar can be traced in modern times. Rav Kook, when he arrived in Israel, wrote, "There is no one, young or old, with whom I can share my thoughts, who is able to comprehend my viewpoint, and this wearies me greatly."¹

Even more candid was the late Rabbi Joseph Dov Soloveitchik. Near the beginning of his famous essay *The Lonely Man of Faith*, he writes, starkly: "I am lonely." He continues, "I am lonely because at times I feel rejected and

thrust away by everybody, not excluding my most intimate friends, and the words of the psalmist, 'My father and my mother have forsaken me,' ring quite often in my ears like the plaintive cooing of the turtledove."² This is extraordinary language.

At times of loneliness, I have found great solace in these passages. They told me I was not alone in feeling alone. Other people had been here before me.

Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah, Jonah and King David were among the greatest spiritual leaders who ever lived. Such, though, is the psychological realism of Tanach that we are given a glimpse into their souls. They were outstanding individuals, but they were still human, not superhuman. Judaism consistently avoided one of the greatest temptations of religion: to blur the boundary between heaven and earth, turning heroes into gods or demigods. The most remarkable figures of Judaism's early history did not find their tasks easy. They never lost faith, but sometimes it was strained almost to breaking point. It is the uncompromising honesty of Tanach that makes it so compelling.

The psychological crises they experienced were understandable. They were undertaking almost impossible tasks. Moses was trying to turn a generation forged in slavery into a free and responsible people. Elijah was one of the first Prophets to criticise kings. Jeremiah had to tell the people what they did not want to hear. Jonah had to face the fact that Divine forgiveness extends even to Israel's enemies and can overturn prophecies of doom. David had to wrestle with political, military and spiritual challenges as well as an unruly personal life.

By telling us of their strife of the spirit, Tanach is conveying something of immense consequence. In their isolation, loneliness, and deep despair, these figures cried out to God "from the depths," and God answered them.

He did not make their lives easier. But He did help them feel they were not alone.

Their very loneliness brought them into an unparalleled closeness to God. In our parsha, in the next chapter, God Himself defended Moses' honour against the slights of Miriam and Aaron. After wishing to die, Elijah encountered God on Mount Horeb in a "still, small voice." Jeremiah found the strength to continue to prophesy, and Jonah was given a lesson in compassion by God Himself. Separated from their contemporaries, they were united with God. They discovered the deep spirituality of solitude.

I write these words while most of the world is in a state of almost complete lockdown because of the coronavirus pandemic. People are unable to gather. Children cannot go to school. Weddings, bar and bat mitzvahs and funerals are deprived of the crowds that would normally attend them. Synagogues are closed. Mourners are unable to say Kaddish. These are unprecedented times.

Many are feeling lonely, anxious, isolated, deprived of company. To help, Natan Sharansky put out a video describing how he endured his years of loneliness in the Soviet Gulag as a prisoner of the KGB. From dozens of reports from those who endured it, including the late John McCain, solitary confinement is the most terrifying punishment of all. In the Torah, the first time the words "not good" appear are in the sentence "It is not good for man to be alone" (Gen. 2:18).

But there are uses of adversity, and consolation in loneliness. When we feel alone, we are not alone, because the great heroes of the human spirit felt this way at times - Moses, David, Elijah and Jonah. So did modern masters like Rav Kook and Rabbi Soloveitchik. It was precisely their loneliness that allowed them to develop a deeper relationship with God. Plumbing the depths, they reached the heights. They met God in the silence of the

soul and felt themselves embraced.

This is not to minimise the shock of the coronavirus pandemic and its consequences. Yet we can gain courage from the many individuals, from biblical times through to more modern ones, who felt their isolation deeply but who reached out to God and found God reaching out to them.

I believe that isolation contains, within it, spiritual possibilities. We can use it to deepen our spirituality. We can read the book of Psalms, re-engaging with some of the greatest religious poetry the world has ever known. We can pray more deeply from the heart. And we can find solace in the stories of Moses and others who had moments of despair but who came through them, their faith strengthened by their intense encounter with the Divine. It is when we feel most alone that we discover that we are not alone, "for You are with me."

Shabbat Shalom

1. Igrot ha-Ra'ayah 1, 128.
2. Joseph Dov Soloveitchik, *The Lonely Man of Faith*, Doubleday, 1992, 3.



School's Out

Sometimes - unexpectedly, despite the best plans, things go terribly wrong. Parashat B'haalot'cha finds the Jews who left Egypt on the way to the Promised Land, but something goes awry, although it is difficult to place our finger on the precise problem or the exact

moment it occurred.

The first ten chapters of the book of B'midbar seem focused and purposeful; the path from Sinai to Israel appears to be charted, and the trip should not be a long one. The Egyptians were vanquished long ago, and the skirmish with Amalek is also behind them. By this point, the people should be ready to take ownership of their ancestral homeland - through their own determination, coupled with Divine assistance.

Yet something goes terribly wrong: By chapter 11, the Jews seem to be slipping toward moral bankruptcy. They lust for food; they behave like heathen. What happened to the people who stood at Sinai? What happened to the nation that proclaimed in one voice, "*Na'aseh V'nishmah*" - 'We will obey and eagerly listen to the word of God'?

A number of early Torah commentaries cite a midrashic teaching that describes the Israelites' departure from Mount Sinai:

They left happily, like a young child running away from school; they said, "(Let us run) lest we receive more commandments." (As cited in Ramban's commentary to the Torah, Bamidbar 10:35)

A cynic might say that they had arrived at the mountain poised to accept Ten Commandments which would forever change their lives, and now, one year later, the number of commandments was in the hundreds - and constantly rising. At their first opportunity, they take off, happy to leave the mountain of law, happy to be free. This would explain their immediate obsession with mundane matters: They had had their fill of holiness.

In truth, this cynical description of the commandments is superficial, at best. The

"Ten Commandments" are more accurately described as the "ten categories" of Jewish Law; the commandments that are enumerated subsequently are the particulars, the individual statutes that comprise each category, the nuts and bolts of Jewish practice that give substance to the categories and concepts we received at Mount Sinai. Nonetheless, the Midrash expresses the mindset of the people: They seem overwhelmed; inundated with holiness. Yes, they knew that "serving God on this mountain" was the reason they were liberated from Egypt in the first place. And yes, they knew what they had committed to when they had agreed to be 'a holy nation and a kingdom of priests.' It seems, though, that they had not anticipated or fully thought out the overwhelming degree to which holiness would dictate their lives. Now that they had begun to implement the commandments, holiness had become more of a burden than they had imagined it would be.

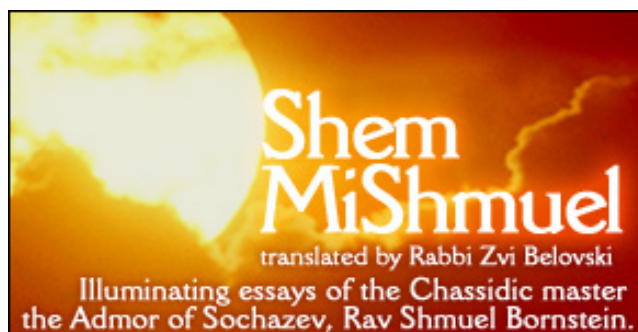
The scene painted by the Midrash of the Israelites' flight from Mount Sinai poses a question that is just as relevant today: How are we supposed to walk away from Sinai? How do we take leave of any point of holiness, be it one demarcated by space or by time? How do we part from Shabbat, from holidays, from synagogues, or from the Land of Israel?

Perhaps the most disturbing element of the Midrash was the happiness they felt. Leaving holiness, despite the restrictions it places on us or the pressure we may feel to live up to its additional requirements, should be tinged with sadness, and not joy. Quite the opposite: The **arrival** of a holy day should bring us joy, and not the cessation of holiness. Often, our departure from a state of heightened holiness is unavoidable; all holidays must come to an end, just as every Shabbat must necessarily have a *motzei Shabbat*. Nonetheless, many of our customs aim to help us focus on the sadness we should feel as the holiness of the day ebbs away: *Havdalah* is designed to help us ease our way from the holiness of Shabbat

and festivals back to weekday existence. Similarly, it is our custom to leave the synagogue (and the Western Wall) without turning our backs to the place of holiness, but rather to take at least three steps backward before fully disconnecting from the holiness that lies within. If we must leave, we do so with a degree of sadness or longing. Places or times of holiness should hold a dear and central place in our hearts.

Here, then, is when things began to slide off track: As the Israelites took leave of Mount Sinai, a place of immense holiness, they should have taken three steps back, to plant the holiness of that unique place and time deep in their hearts before turning around to face their next destination of holiness, the Land of Israel. Instead, they turned and ran from Sinai, ran away from the holiness, and became unworthy of the holiness that awaited them in Israel. Because they turned their backs, literally and figuratively, the Land of Israel slips further and further out of reach. The generation that ran away from the holiness of Mount Sinai was incapable of running towards the holiness of the Land of Israel. An entire generation would have to pass before they would be ready to approach the Holy Land.

For a more in-depth analysis see: <http://arikah.blogspot.co.il/2016/06/audio-and-essays-parashat-bahaalotcha.html>



Aharon's Gift

The sidrah opens with a brief description of the Menorah in the Mishkan and the command that Aharon and his descendants are charged with its lighting. This follows directly after the lengthy description of the offerings brought at the dedication of the altar, described at the end of Parashas Naso. The connection between these events is the subject of a well-known midrash:

We find above that all of the tribes brought offerings, except for the tribe of Levi. Who was the prince of Levi? None other than Aharon, and Aharon did not offer together with the other princes. He said, "Perhaps the tribe of Levi is not acceptable because of me." God said to Moshe, "Go and say to Aharon, I have prepared you for greater things than that!...As for the sacrifices, they are only applicable when the Beis HaMikdash stands. But the lights are everlasting...and all of the berachos which I gave to you so that you may bless My children will also never be canceled." (Midrash Tanchuma, Beha'alo'secha 5)

It is not clear to me why Aharon was satisfied with the lighting of the Menorah, whereas he appears not to have been happy with the twice-daily incense, which the verses consider praiseworthy, or with the animal and daily flour offerings or the Yom Kippur service, all of which could be performed only by him. He could enter the Holy of Holies, stand in God's Temple, and utter blessings in His name. Indeed, the whole tribe of Levi were servants of God...It is also well known that when the Beis HaMikdash is not extant and the sacrifices are canceled, lighting the Menorah also becomes defunct. Rather, this midrash hints at the Chanukah of the Chashmonaim [the Chanukah familiar to us], which applies even after the

Destruction... (Ramban, Bamidbar 8:2)

Thus, in place of the temporary offerings which the other tribes brought, Aharon was promised something which would be everlasting. The dynasty of the Chashmonaim, who were *kohanim* and thus descendants of Aharon, fought against the Greco-Syrians in the time of the second Beis HaMikdash. They rededicated the defiled Sanctuary, and when they came to relight the Menorah, a miracle occurred in which one day's quantity of oil burned for eight. In the merit of the Chashmonaim, Jews throughout the world have celebrated Chanukah ever since.

KOHANIM AND LEVI'IM

My holy father explained the essential difference between *kohanim* and *levi'im*. The task of the Levi is to connect earth to heaven. His role in the Beis HaMikdash is as a singer. Through his beautiful melodies he inspires the people to turn heavenwards, lifting them from their physical limitations to the spiritual world. The *kohen*, on the other hand, connects heaven to earth. He draws the presence of God into the Beis HaMikdash, the fire onto the altar, and infuses the world with the Divine. Perforce, the Levi's service is performed in public, whereas that of the *kohen* is practiced away from the public eye, reflecting its intensely holy nature.

This helps us to understand the complaint of Aharon recorded in the midrash. He was, as the text takes pains to point out, the prince of the tribe of Levi, even though he himself had been promoted to the rank of *kohen*. As their leader, he wanted to have a part not only in his distinct Divine service as a *kohen*, but also in the separate, Levitical style of worship. He had already been promised exclusive rights to all of the special sacrificial duties in the Beis HaMikdash - the heaven-to-earth connection. Now, to match the princes of every other tribe, he asked for a role *within* his own tribe - the

rights to an act or service which reflected the modality of earth to heaven. In response, God promised him the lights of the Menorah (or whichever menorah we decide the midrash is describing). That the act of lighting the Menorah is a Levitical type is apparent from examining its presentation in the verses:

When you light [literally, "raise up"] the lights, the seven lights shall throw light toward the face of the Menorah. (Bemidbar 8:2)

When you light - [Rashi notes that this word really means "raise up" and comments that] since the flame arises, the word for "raising" is written in the context of the lighting, for one needs to light [hold the taper next to the wick] until the flame arises on its own. (Rashi loc. cit.)

As we see, the Torah goes out of its way to indicate that not only must Aharon light the Menorah, but the flames must rise heavenwards before the act of lighting is considered complete. This symbolizes Levi's style of worship - raising the physical toward God, igniting enthusiasm for matters spiritual in the hearts of the people. So the lighting of the Menorah is a Levitical activity carried out by a *kohen*.

It is interesting to note that the Menorah's connection to the *kohen* is preserved by the fact that unlike acts performed by the Levi, it is lit deep within the Beis HaMikdash, away from public view. This may underscore the statement of Chazal which claims that lighting the Menorah is not actually classified as an act of *avodah* - proper kohanic service. For although it is performed by a *kohen*, the lighting has a distinct earth-to-heaven flavor, distinguishing it from other kohanic obligations. We now appreciate why the lighting of the Menorah satisfied Aharon's request, whereas any of the other privileges

which he enjoyed in the Mishkan did not.

CHANUKAH AND GALUS

Using the concepts gained thus far, we can begin to understand the Ramban, who noted that since even the lighting of the Menorah was canceled when the Beis HaMikdash was destroyed, the promise made by God to Aharon referred to the menorah of our annual Chanukah.

It is of great significance that the menorah of Chanukah is the only vestige of the Beis HaMikdash service which remains with us. The Divine service, as we have already briefly mentioned, is an intensely holy matter, one which expresses the deepest and most spiritual of concepts. As such, it must be performed in a private, secluded domain, behind the walls of the Beis HaMikdash.

When exile occurs, the whole order of things alters, and the profundity and confidential nature of the Divine service is under threat. This is reflected by the Hebrew word for "exile," *galus*, which finds its root in the word *galui* (revealed). Exile for *klal Yisrael* is a time when the forces of evil attack the most sacred parts of Jewish life, threatening to profane and reveal that which is concealed. The risk is too great, and so the Divine worship in the Beis HaMikdash is interrupted. Of course, the *kohanim* cannot perform their sacred duties, as this would be particularly inappropriate outside Yerushalayim and the Beis HaMikdash. Only when the spirituality which the *kohanim* bring down from on high can rest in the correct place, within the secluded domain of God's house, can there be any role of this sort within *klal Yisrael*.

None of this, however, applies to the earth-to-heaven approach of the Levi. Since his role need not be played out in a spiritually private place, he can inspire people to turn to God in any circumstances. This means that the lighting of the menorah, which is of a Levitical

nature, can endure throughout the exile. Its intense and holy light can continue to illuminate Jewish life wherever *klal Yisrael* may be. In fact, the explicit aim of lighting the menorah of Chanukah is to publicize the great miracle which happened in the time of the Chashmonaim. While all other aspects of the service in the Beis HaMikdash are damaged and nullified by *galus*, the lighting on Chanukah actually thrives on exposure to the outside; the deeper the exile and the greater the grip of the anti-spiritual forces, the more effective its message.

We can well understand why Aharon was comforted by the offer of the lamps of Chanukah, for in the merit of his descendants the Chashmonaim, *klal Yisrael* have the radiance of their light until this day.



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Life's Second Chance

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's parsha discusses the topic of Pesach Sheini, the Second Passover offering. Certain members of the Jewish people had become impure due to contact with a dead body, and they were therefore unable to bring the Passover offering at its appointed time, the 14th of Nisan). They asked Moses and Aaron why they should be prevented from performing this mitzvah along with the rest of the Jewish people. Moses inquired of God what course of action these people should take, whereupon God instructed them to bring the offering one month later, on the 14th of Iyar, Pesach Sheini (Numbers 9:6-11).

According to the commentary "L'ma'an Achai V'Rei'ai," the lesson of this story is that a person always gets a second chance. We see this not only from the impure people ultimately being given another opportunity to bring the Passover offering; even their initial request implies that they expect a solution to be found! How did they learn this attitude? Why do they assume that they will be given a second chance?

The Talmud (Sukkah 25a) identifies these men as Yosef's coffin-bearers. The figure of Yosef will help us resolve the question we raised. When Yosef is on his deathbed, he tells his brothers, "I am going to die, and God *pakod yifkod*." These words can be loosely translated to mean, "God will surely remember you." But why is the verb doubled? Had Yosef said just *yifkod*, the same meaning would be conveyed!

Yosef, through his use of this double expression, is hinting to his brothers that God always offers a second chance. Yosef's words can be interpreted in the following way: "If, for whatever reason, God does not remember you now (*pakod*), don't worry; He will remember you (*yifkod*) at another time."

Let us not forget that Yosef, when he was sold into slavery by his brothers, lost his family, his wealth, and his freedom. Yet he did not give up hope. He maintained his righteousness in the midst of many challenges, because he understood that God always offers a second chance. This is manifested by Yosef's regaining everything he lost. He is reunited with his family, becomes wealthier than he ever could have imagined, and as viceroy of the Egyptian empire, can do what he pleases.

The people who asked Moses and Aaron if they would get another opportunity to bring the Passover offering learned their optimistic attitude from Yosef. Carrying Yosef's coffin caused them to be influenced by the values he embodied. Because of Yosef's impression on them, they had the holy chutzpah to approach Moses and Aaron and request a second chance.

BRIDAL SECRETS

According to "L'ma'an Achai V'Rei'ai," Yosef himself learned this attitude from his mother, Rachel. In order to understand how, we must delve into the dynamics of Rachel's wedding night.

Rachel had been promised to Yaakov. Yet Yaakov, who knew the crafty nature of his uncle Lavan, suspected that Lavan would try to get him to marry Rachel's sister, Leah, instead. Based on this suspicion, Yaakov and Rachel devised signs that would enable Yaakov to verify the identity of his veiled bride under the marriage canopy. On the day of the wedding, Lavan prevented Rachel from leaving the house and dressed up Leah in her place. Rachel knew that her sister would be mortified to be publicly exposed as the wrong bride, so she taught Leah these pre-arranged signs (Megillah 13b).

The Torah tells us that Leah's eyes were "*rakot*" - a word that means "soft" or "weak" (Genesis 29:17). The Talmud (Baba Batra

123a) wonders how the Torah could speak so disparagingly of a righteous person, especially when the Torah's style is to refer respectfully even to lowly creations.

[When Noah gathered animals to put in the ark, the Torah says that he assembled "pure ones, and ones that were *not pure*" (Genesis 7:8). From the Torah's use of extra words ("ones that were not pure" instead of "impure ones"), our Sages derive that the Torah is careful to even respect the honor of non-kosher animals!]

The Talmud explains that although Leah's eyes were weak, this statement is not disparaging; rather, it is an expression of praise. Leah had overheard people speculating that she and her sister Rachel would probably marry their cousins, Yaakov and Esav. The older two (Esav and Leah) and the younger two (Yaakov and Rachel) would be paired. When Leah inquired about Esav, she was told that he was a wicked person. When she inquired about Yaakov, she was told that he was "a complete person who sits in the tents" of Torah, perfecting his character traits (Genesis 25:27).

When Leah heard this, she began to cry - because she, too, wanted to marry a righteous person. She cried so much that her eyelashes fell out. Because of her weeping, the Torah describes her eyes as "soft" or "weak." This description is to her credit, since she desired so deeply to marry a righteous man.

PUBLIC SCANDAL

Based on all this background information, we now have a new difficulty to resolve. Once Leah had married Yaakov, due to Lavan's trickery, Rachel would probably have to marry Esav. In that case, we might question whether Rachel did the right thing by passing the secret signs. Sure, had Leah been exposed at the chuppah as the wrong bride, she would have been extremely humiliated, and the scandal would have made the front page of the

Paddan Aram Times. But after a few weeks, no one would be talking about it anymore.

Instead, Rachel taught Leah the signs, and by doing so seemingly forfeited the rest of her life. Why was this the proper choice? Perhaps it would have been better to temporarily humiliate Leah so that Rachel would not have to spend the rest of her life with an evil man!

According to "L'ma'an Achai V'Rei'ai," when Rachel taught Leah the signs, she did not seal her fate to marry Esav - because, at that moment, she brought into the world the concept of a second chance. Although it seemed that there were only two possible ways for the sets of siblings to marry each other, Rachel did not allow herself to get trapped by this perspective.

Instead, she created a third possibility. If she did not merit to marry Yaakov right then, she understood that she would be given another opportunity to do so at some future point. Thus, Yosef learned the principle of second chances from his mother Rachel, who initiated the concept and brought it down into the world.

No matter how many mistakes we've made, and how impure we might have become, and how many callings in life we might have failed to respond to, we can still emulate the ways of Rachel and Yosef: never to give up hope, because we know that God always offers us a second chance.