

## פרשת בהעלותך

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### OVERVIEW

The first instruction in our Sidrah concerns the Menorah whose seven lamps are to illuminate the sanctuary from evening to morning. The Levites began their service at the age of 25 and end their tenure of office at age fifty.

There follow references to the celebration of the Pessach festival in the desert and a more detailed account of the "second Pessach" observance required by those who were prevented from participating in the first Pessach.

The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night shall guide the people during the march through the desert. Two silver trumpets give the signal for departure and halt. On the 20th day of Iyar the long columns of Israelites begin moving in the direction of the promised land. Despite the daily ample ration of Manna, a wave of dissatisfaction is prompted by the lack of fresh meat. Gigantic flocks of quail descend onto the camp but almost immediately divine punishment is meted out to the instigators of the rebellion.

Moshe is personally challenged by Aharon and Miriam who are critical of his "Ethiopian wife". G-d intervenes, and Miriam is struck by leprosy and forced to leave the camp for a period of seven days. After her return the people resume the march and then camp in the desert of Paran.

### COMMENTARY

#### The Menorah as Symbol

The previous Sidrah concluded with the festive offering by the tribal princes. Our text begins with the order to Aharon's sons to kindle the seven lamps of the Menorah which were turned towards the Holy of

Holies. The Midrash explains the connection between the two neighboring chapters: "Why does the kindling of the Menorah follow the dedication of the sanctuary through the offerings of the princes? Because Aharon was saddened when he saw that the tribe of Levi was kept away from the solemn ceremony. G-d comforted him and said, "Your honor will be greater than theirs for you will have the task of kindling the lights". Another opinion has G-d say to Aharon, "Any further dedication will not take place through sacrifices and contributions but through the kindling of the lights whose permanent servicing you (and your descendants) will be entrusted with. Your honor will be greater than that of your brethren, for sacrifices and the contributions will cease with the destruction of the temple; but the lights of the Menorah will continue to shine through the lights of Chanukah which Israel will kindle year after year".

Both Midrashim have a common direction: Aharon and his sons form the elite of the people; they are their spiritual guides and guardians of Israel's moral integrity. Their role appears to be a modest one without a reward of fame and fortune. The symbol of their activity, the Menorah, is the only tangible testimony that will survive the nation's political downfall. Thus these Midrashim reveal the vital importance of the spiritual task that the Levites perform. All Israel is called upon to participate in their work, especially at a time when its erstwhile glory will be reduced to a mere memory represented by the eight-arm Menorah which again and again kindles the flame of Jewish hope.

#### The Lights

Oral tradition specifies that the three lights on each side incline their flames towards the center light which, in turn, leans towards the Holy of Holies. This symbolizes

the concentration of the manifold spiritual forces and substances in the direction of the source and origin of every human activity: the divine impetus through which the "blossoms and fruit" of the Menorah receive their lifegiving light.

#### The Service of the Levites

The time frame of the Levite service is in force only during the sojourn in the desert when it included the transporting and assembling of the sanctuary and its sacred vessels. After their arrival in the holy land their service begins at age 25 and only ends when loss of voice (choir) or physical handicaps prevent their fulfilling the functions required by the Levites.

#### The second Pessach

Only impurity or absence due to a distant journey could prevent individual participation at the ceremony of the pascal lamb. In such cases the Pessach sacrifice is being offered one month later and consumed together with Matzah and bitter herbs. It is the only case when a religious duty attached to a certain date may be fulfilled on another date: the reason is the extraordinary importance the Torah attaches to the togetherness of the Jewish people at the Pessach celebration. We find this thought stressed in the Haggadah which sees the essential failing of the "rasha", the evildoer, in that he excludes himself from the community. Anything is possible as long as the Jew does not sever the bond between himself and his brethren.

Pessach, festival of our peoplehood, of our unshakeable trust in G-d, provides the opportunity for every Jew to proclaim that he himself was brought out of Egypt by G-d. No Jewish man and woman may abstain from demonstrating this affirmation.

The laws of the second Pessach are distinguished by its very date. We have here a chronological discrepancy: The first verse

in Ch. 9 refers to G-d speaking to Moshe "in the first month" of the second year after the exodus from Egypt, whereas nine chapters earlier the first verse of the book of Bamidbar has G-d speak to Moshe "in the second month" of the first year. The order should be actually reversed. Yet we know that in a number of other such discrepancies the rule applies that there is no regular chronological order in the text of the Torah. The order of chapters is often motivated by certain reasons and circumstances. Thus the commandment of the Pessach sacrifice became valid only with the conquest of the land at the conclusion of the march through the desert. Therefore the Torah discusses first the march order in the desert and only then mentions the second Pessach which becomes valid on the conclusion of the march through the desert. The Pessach sacrifice offered in the second year of the exodus (Ch. 9) was an exception and was not repeated during the ensuing forty years in the desert.

#### Journey through the Desert

It is important to note that the stages of the journey were of different duration: a day and night, a week or two, sometimes a month or even a year. Not knowing how long they would halt at each stop, the people had to be prepared to move ahead on short notice. During this period they learned the most important lesson of their lives: to put their full trust in the divine guidance without knowing where their travels would take them, always ready to settle at the place assigned to them. Confidence and patience, but also vigilance, were the most striking attributes of this forty-year journey which was to extend over many centuries.

At every stage of the journey, the arrival and departure were accompanied by a prayer (10:35-36) which we recite during the divine service when the Torah scroll is taken from and then returned to the shrine. The two verses are framed by two inverted letter " ך " which, according to the oral tradition,

transform the verses into a separate volume. This would be the fourth book of Moses in three parts: the first portion from the beginning to V.34, Ch. 10, the second part, the two verses here, and the third part from Ch. 11 to the end of the book. The Torah would then consist of seven instead of five volumes. R. Yohanan's interpretation is based on the verse in Mishlei (9:1) "wisdom has built her house, she has hewn out her seven pillars".

What is the special significance of these verses? Whenever the holy ark began to move, Moshe called in the Presence of G-d to advance in front of the march to cause the enemy to disperse. Whenever the holy ark halted, Moshe called on the Majesty of G-d's Presence to join Israel's multitudes. Moshe knows that the ark, symbol of the law, would be beset by countless enemies in the course of its wandering through the centuries. He knows that only through G-d's help would the law and its champions be able to withstand the blows of their attackers. He also knows that Israel would live and be victorious so long as the law rests on its shoulders. When the day comes on which the ark of the covenant, embodiment of the divine will, will have gained the peace and recognition of mankind at large, Israel will savor its own peace and harmony having grown in numbers far surpassing those of any period in the past. (The textual reference to Israel's "myriads of thousands" literally means a figure of twenty million souls, a number never reached in the past but projecting the prophet's vision in messianic times).

These verses spread before us the broad scope of Israel's history that is intimately bound to the eternal supremacy of G-d's law. The goal must be the total conformity of Israel's will with the Will of G-d. It is these two verses that provide the direction and guidance for Israel's path through history.

### The Trumpets

The sound of one trumpet was the signal for calling together the responsible representatives of the people. Two trumpets summoned all tribes. Both had to be completely similar in shape and color. This was to show the leaders and the people that everyone was equally worthy of being summoned before G-d. The identical trumpets also introduce military operations and the ceremonial observances on the festival days.

### The Quails

It is difficult to conceive of men who have seen with their own eyes G-d's unfailing support of their physical needs and who would exhibit such a poor showing of faint-heartedness and ingratitude. It seems inconceivable that the sole motive for the revolt was the lack of fresh meat. We believe that this was indeed the main reason and it points up the tragedy of a fatal national character flaw: the inability to appreciate the fruit of G-d's goodness, the chasm between what the Jew is and what he should be. Inevitably, when times are peaceful and no immediate danger looms on the horizon Israel's cry is heard: "give us meat that we may eat". We understand Moshe's indignation as he contrasts the numerous miraculous deeds wrought by G-d for the benefit of Israel with the sad spectacle, of their shameful complaints. Their demand having been granted, the sudden wave of deaths demonstrated G-d's extreme displeasure with the display of greed and mistrust.

### Eldad and Medad

Moshe's burden is almost too heavy to bear. G-d's decision to place a group of advisors at his side comes at the time when Moshe almost despaired in the face of the people's new revolt (9:14). The "elders" are chosen at a rate of six men for each tribe, a total of 72 men. They are all endowed with

the spirit of prophecy that enables them to fulfill their assignment of assisting Moshe.

But only seventy men were gathered by Moshe about the Tent as stipulated by divine decree. According to one opinion (Sanhedrin 17a) Eldad and Medad remained behind out of modesty of their own accord. They were convinced that they were the least worthy and because of their modesty the spirit of prophecy descended also on them.

In commenting to V. 11:25 ("when the spirit rested upon them they prophesied, as they never did again"), Maimonides follows a different line of interpretation: "Those who receive divine revelations may be compared with men who perceive the dazzling brightness of lightning in the middle of the night. Among them are those who are fortunate in that they perceive a great number of lightning flashes in rapid order, so much so that the night is illuminated by the almost continuous flashing of lightning. This is as it was with Moshe and his extraordinary gift of prophecy. Others receive the rapid lightning flashes in intervals of varying duration. This was the case for most prophets. And there are those who experience this unique occurrence but once in a lifetime. This happened to the seventy elders who prophesied this one time and never regained the spirit of prophecy".

Moshe's deep humanity shows itself in the surprising response to his disciple (Joshua) who complains about the two men who prophesied in the midst of the camp without being authorized to do so: "Would that all the people of G-d were prophets". There is not a trace of jealousy, no fear to be outdone by another. Here we see the simplicity and the grandeur of a man who never thinks of his own advantage, never harbors a selfish motive, a man who has but one aim: to deepen the bond between G-d

and the people and to guide them in attaining the highest possible level of Kedusha.

### The "Ethiopian" Wife

This episode contains a number of difficulties that become clear through a closer perusal of the text. Miriam and Aharon spread rumors regarding Moshe's "Ethiopian" wife. They criticize him for claiming a monopoly in that G-d only speaks to him and not to others who claim a similar privilege. As a matter of fact Moshe wife, Tziporah, was a Midianite. It must be assumed that the thrust of their complaint was Moshe's decision to abstain from marital relations with his wife in order to be able to devote his entire energy to his noble task. Accordingly, the expression "Ethiopian" (כושית) means that in the public perception Moshe considered his wife as an "outcast" with whom contact had to be avoided. Miriam has to suffer the consequences of the evil talk. She was afflicted with leprosy and was excluded from the camp for seven days, shamed and humiliated. But the people eagerly await her return for this was after all Miriam, the prophetess who intoned the unforgettable hymn of praise at the sea of reeds, the woman whose merit brought them water from the well.

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