

## **Parsha Behaalotecha**

### Chapters 8-12

Once again as we move into our Summer season and eventually the High Holidays, we are finally in the Book of Numbers, Bamidbar, which means in the Desert. In general, the fourth book of the Torah covers the period from when the Children of Israel received the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai to their journey to the east side of the Jordan River. Hence it is both priestly and Mosaic in nature. Before the Book of Deuteronomy was found and added, Numbers was the last book in the Torah. Hence we must recognize that the Israelites will eventually undergo a leadership change as well as the start of their ownership of this new land flowing with milk and honey.

This week's portion is the third in the Book of Numbers. Let's look at chapters 8 and 9 which on a Saturday would be covered in the first five aliyahs. First, Aaron and his sons are instructed in lighting a special Menorah so that its 7 candles burn as one. This is to be done on a daily basis.

Second, Aaron and his sons are instructed in dedicating the Levites to the task of assisting the high Priests. God has chosen the Levites instead of the first born of Israel because God punished the first-born who were involved with the sin of the Golden Calf. Levites begin to serve when they are 25, and they retire at age 50 when their role changes to being the trainers of the younger Levites.

Third, God describes a Second Passover celebration exactly one month after the start of the first celebration since leaving Egypt. This Passover is observed by those persons who were legitimately unable to be present for the first Passover, such as hunters. Missing a Passover seder is a severe offence; in fact, those who are able but do not celebrate a first Passover are to be "cut off from their kin".

Fourth, God's presence as a fiery cloud is again described. When the cloud is situated around the tabernacle and stays there, the Children of Israel remain encamped. When the cloud moves, so do the people. In some instances, the encampment lasts but a day; at other times, it lasts for many years.

Lastly, Moses is commanded to build two silver Shofarot. Different in sound from a ram's horn, these shofarot are used to advise the people about when to move the encampment, when to make war upon adversaries, at the occasion of a new moon, at sacrifices, and during seasonal changes.

The second half of the parsha, chapters 10-12 and found in aliyahs 6 and 7, describes three significant events in the journey from Sinai to Moab. The journey begins from the wilderness of Paran as the cloud over the tabernacle begins to move. Moses asks Jethro, his father-in-law, to be his guide through wilderness. Jethro was from Midian, which bordered on the Sinai, and therefore was well suited to the task. Then the parsha describes 3 uprisings against Moses and God.

First, some of the Israelies began to murmur. God responded with either fire or a lightning strike, killed those who were murmuring. The number killed is unknown. The exact reason for the murmuring is unknown. The episode lasts for only three verses.

Immediately after, some other Israelites begin to complain that all they have to eat is manna – no fish, no fruit and no vegetables. They want to eat flesh. Apparently, this complaining greatly upsets Moses, and he tells God he can't lead the people anymore. So God has him choose 70 elders from the entire camp. While not getting special assignments, these elders do get to sit at the tabernacle while God's spirit is in their presence in the cloud. This additional emotional support appears to be satisfactory for Moses.

Shortly thereafter, God generates a powerful wind that drives thousands of quail towards the people. The birds were an easy catch, and those thirsting for flesh are allowed their fill for 30 days. However, God then kills all the flesh eaters with a swift plague because they lusted after / crave meat. Obviously God is not pleased with anyone who succumbs to such a lusting. Manna should be sufficient.

And lastly we have the story of Aaron and Miriam who criticized Moses for marrying a non-Jew, possibly Zipporah the Midianite (and the daughter of Jethro) or perhaps an Ethiopian or someone from Southern Egypt. God is very upset by their comments because he admires Moses. God envelopes Miriam in the cloud, and after the cloud leaves, Miriam is leperous – white as snow. Aaron pleads with Moses to save her and he apologizes for what he has done. Moses pleads with God for Miriam's return to health. God responds by sending Miriam out of the camp for 7 days, and she returns completely cured. In some circles, leprosy was regarded as the punishment for slander. Recall that back in April our parsha was about this very subject, and we noted that "lashon harah", evil words, spreading rumors, is considered a very bad sin.

While Miriam may be a famous woman in the Bible, the fact that Aaron was not punished is in keeping with the male-dominance of the scriptures.

The Haftarah is from Zechariah, and the final verses describe a dream in which a Menorah appears. Zerubbavel is in need for encouragement, and God's angel interprets the menorah by saying that "***NOT BY MIGHT, NOR BY POWER, BUT BY MY HOLY SPIRIT, SAITH THE LORD OF HOSTS***". In other words, there will be obstacles along your way during your life, but if you believe in God and follow in his ways, God's spirit will protect you and enable you to accomplish your life's work. This was Zechariah's way of encouraging the people who had returned from Babylonian exile to the Holy Land in 530 BCE and were afraid of the challenges that lay ahead of them. The connection between the Torah and Haftarah is thru the image of the Menorah that was discussed at the start of Numbers, Chapter 8.