

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

Portion of Beha'alotcha

From Rav Binny Freedman

We all love getting those cute 3 minute videos during the day that give us a laugh or a smile. Recently, someone sent me a clip that really got me thinking. It's a video of a fellow giving his (I assume) two sons a challenge: they have four minutes to call the number he has written down... using an old rotary phone.

Their comical and unsuccessful attempts to figure out how to use the phone were also instructive. At one point, realizing that turning the dial round was not actually accomplishing anything, one of them realizes they need to 'turn the phone on', so he lifts the receiver and puts it back down with a triumphant look! And through-out the video as they figure out how to use the rotary-dial, they continuously miss the detail that makes it all irrelevant: they keep putting the receiver back down....

It never ceases to amaze me how our children seem to be seeing the world through completely different lenses.

This week's portion, *Be'ha'alotcha*, is a fascinating commentary on this idea:

At first glance it seems our portion contains a completely disparate group of stories which seem to have no connection with each other. What do the Jewish people complaining that they want meat have to do with the mitzvah to blow trumpets in the Temple and what do both these ideas have to do with Miriam and Aaron slandering Moshe's decision to move out of his home (one interpretation to the story at the end of the portion) seemingly abandoning his wife and children?

A friend of mine, Dr. Baruch Sterman, shared an idea he heard in the name of Rav Yisrael Meir Lau (past Chief rabbi of the State of Israel and a Holocaust survivor) which helped me to unlock the common theme of this week's portion.

Hashem commands Moshe (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 10:1-10) to fashion two trumpets of silver which will be used to gather the people for public declarations, signal the people when it is to time to break camp, and gather them in times of distress (such as war) or celebration (such as on festivals).

The Talmud shares with us (Tractate *Menachot* 28b) an interesting detail regarding these Trumpets:

Unlike all the other vessels Moshe made, the trumpets he fashioned were valid for use in his generation only, and not for subsequent generations.

The Talmud bases this conclusion on the fact that the verse (ibid. v. 2) repeats the word '*Lecha*' for you, twice; these trumpets (*chatzotzrot*) were specifically for Moshe and the generation of the desert. One wonders why these trumpets specifically were meant only for his generation, as

opposed to say, the Aron (Ark) Moshe built (see *Devarim* (Deuteronomy) 10:1-5), for the *Luchot* (tablets).

Explains Rav Lau: These trumpets were all about communicating; they were used to communicate with the people in various circumstances. Each generation needs its own language of communication; and leaders need to understand that each new generation needs to be communicated with in its own way.

This, incidentally, is why the Aron (ark) Moshe fashioned was forever, because the Aron represents the written Torah (tablets) it holds, and the written Torah, literally engraved in stone, is never meant to change. It is representative of those ideas and principals that are eternal and remain true for each generation, like honoring one's parents, an ethical code that proscribes theft murder and adultery, and the need for Shabbat, a weekly day of introspection and rest.

And that is actually the theme of this entire portion of *Be'ha'alotcha*.

It begins with the lighting of the candles in the temple every day, representative of the Torah being 'lit' for each generation every day because if we don't pass on our Torah and the essentials of faith and Judaism to each generation then we cease to matter as a people in the world. Then the Torah describes how the Tribe of Levi, now the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle) is dedicated, will assume their positions as role models. Because every generation needs its teachers, and the first-born, who were meant to assume this role, participated in the sin of the Golden calf, and we need and deserve a leadership that can be role models....

Then the portion introduces the mitzvah of *Pesach Sheni*: the opportunity for those who were impure or unable (for appropriate reasons) to offer the Paschal lamb, to have a second chance to fulfil this mitzvah, a month later. Perhaps this represents the idea that we need, as parents, educators, and leaders, to know when we need to give our children and charges an opportunity to start over....

And we see this as well in the story (*Bamidbar* chap. 11) of the desire for meat which as Rav Soleveitchik suggests (See ***Teaching with clarity and empathy***; Reflections of the Rav pp. 150-158) reflected the need for a fundamental change in Moshe's leadership style, because the next generation needed something different. Indeed, this may have necessitated Moshe giving himself over completely to the people as a nursemaid does (*Bamidbar* 11:12) which may be why Miriam and Aaron, seeing Moshe neglecting his wife and children took issue with him....

Be'ha'alotcha is all about the need to communicate differently and appropriately with each generation according to its needs, while not losing the essentials that need to remain constant, in the process.

As I was writing this article our daughter who is 22 and soon entering her final year of university where she recently made the Dean's list (meaning she scored in the top one percentile at her University) walked in the room and saw me watching the video of these two boys desperately trying to figure out the rotary phone.

So I asked her if she had ever seen the video, and after watching for a moment she smiled and said "yeah so dumb, they can't figure it out..." so I asked her what they were doing wrong and she said they needed to dial the rotary all the way around for each number dialed.

And I asked her again what they were doing wrong as the screen showed them putting the receiver back down yet again, and she still thought it was how they were dialing ... completely missing the need to pick up and listen to the receiver ... !

Our children see the world through completely different lenses!

"Be'chol Dor va'dor chayav Adam lirot et Atzmo ke'ilu Hu yatza Mi'mitzraim"

"In each generation a person must see himself as though he (himself) exited Egypt"

(From the Passover Haggadah)

This thought, stated by Maimonides as a seminal idea of the Passover Seder, is discussed by many commentaries, who generally focus on the fact the recalling and even re-experiencing the Exodus from Egypt, must be personal. But there is a different way to look at it, which I had personally never considered: Perhaps the Haggadah is also alluding to the fact that in each generation we need to find our own place, in our own way to feel and experience our part in the unfolding and magnificent story of the Jewish people.

What worked for our parents does not always work for our children, and sometimes as teachers and leaders we also need to know when it is time to pass the torch on to the next generation of leaders who can continue to impart a Judaism that is inspiring as well as relevant, in the language our children need to hear.

And while the message and the content remain the same, if the methodology and tools have not changed in decades, we need to give serious thought to whether we are missing something critical in how we share Judaism with the next generation.

It is perhaps instructive to note, that in next week's portion of *Shlach*, the people rebel, resulting in an entire generation losing the opportunity to enter the land and wandering in the desert for forty years, before a new leadership will take the next generation, born free and with an entirely new perspective, to finally conquer the land of Israel and bring the Jewish people home...

Something to think about...

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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