

(Dvar Torah continued from the front page...)

frenzied night leaving Egypt—tent stakes being pulled up, the hubbub of sorting and packing, animals anxiously stirring and people rushing around every which way. People crowding together, craning their necks to see the cloud, to figure out which direction it was moving, how fast it was going, maybe even stampeding in an effort not to be left behind. On its own, merely trying to move with God's cloud seems chaotic.

So God gives some addition instructions:

Make for yourself two silver trumpets. You will make them hammered, and they will be for you to call the assembly together and to signal the movement of the camps. (Numbers 10:2, translation mine)

The Torah goes on to detail how different trumpet blasts signified different things—when the whole community gathers, when the leaders gather, and how to move. The trumpets coordinate which parts of the camp moved, creating order where there might have been chaos.

The midrash in Sifrei Bamidbar points out that trumpets teach us that we need both the Divine signal to move and the human act of organizing and communicating amongst ourselves. We might be tempted to think God's direct command is enough, but we would be wrong.

Like B'nei Yisrael, we too are journeying through a wilderness. And like B'nei Yisrael, we too need both human organization and Divine guidance to journey through the desert together.

Just as God's clouds lifting off the mishkan were an unmistakable sign for the Israelites, so too our moral compass must drive us to action now. It must be obvious to us that human life is of inestimable value and that therefore the devaluation of black lives and the continued murder of black men at the hands of police is unacceptable.

Like the ancient Israelites, we too need trumpets: handmade, human tools that direct our energy and movement.

We have the trumpet of Oral Torah: The deep, nuanced discussions of the midrash and Gemara that call us to examine an issue from every possible perspective, while challenging us to live out our highest values.

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## Fuchsberg Jerusalem Center Conservative Yeshiva

# TORAH SPARKS

## *Beha'alotcha*

June 13, 2020 | Sivan 21 5780

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Triennial I (Numbers 8:1-9:14) Etz Hayyim, p. 816  
Haftarah I (Zechariah 2:14-4:7) Etz Hayyim, p. 837

### Divine and Human Agency

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This week, we encounter B'nei Yisrael at a turning point. Having rushed out of Egypt, fled across the Red Sea and camped at Sinai where we received Torah and built the Mishkan, we are now ready to move forward. In *Parshat Beha'alotkha* we are beginning our march through the desert, towards the culmination of redemption—a free, justly organized society in the Promised Land.

Just as God guided us with a cloud in our flight from Egypt, so too, God will guide us through the desert:

And whenever the cloud lifted from the Tent, the Israelites would set out accordingly; and at the spot where the cloud settled, there the Israelites would make camp. (Numbers 9:17, JPS translation)

However, the system of the cloud ascending and descending from the Mishkan presents a programmatic difficulty. Imagine it! The scene probably would look something like that

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## D'var Haftarah: Challenged by a Heroine

*Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, From the Archives*

=The vision of the golden menorah at the end of this week's haftarah was used by the sages as a springboard for their own message: "And he [the angel] said to me [Zechariah]: 'What do you see?' And I said: 'I see a menorah all of gold, with a bowl above it. The lamps on it are seven in number, and the lamps above it have seven pipes; and by it are two olive trees, one on the right side of the bowl and one on its left side.' 'Do you know what those things mean?' asked the angel who talks with me; and I said, 'No, my lord.' (Zechariah 4:2-5) Several verses later (after the end of the haftarah), the angel explains the significance of the different parts of the vision, including the seven branches of the menorah, which represent, "the eyes of the Lord, ranging over the entire world." (verse 10). The light provided by the menorah represents God's providential involvement in the world while the seven branches of the menorah infer that God's providence is total.

This idea is turned on its head in a dialogue between God and the people of Israel found in the following medieval midrash: [The midrash quotes from a verse from the prophet Zephaniah]: 'And it will come to pass that I will search out Jerusalem with lamps' (Zephaniah 1:12) The people of Israel ask God: 'Master of the World, with all of the honor due us, [what need do] you have to search Jerusalem with lamps? [The people cannot fathom why God would need to search out the world with a candle.] Haven't You promised the prophets [that You will serve as our Source of light. This they illustrate with a number of verses, including:] 'The sun will no longer be your light of day, neither for brightness shall the moon give light to you, for God will be for you an everlasting light...' (Isaiah 60:19)... so how can You [God] say that You need to search Jerusalem by candlelight?' The Holy One Blessed Be He responded: You [the children of Israel] don't understand. The answer to your question is found in the image that I showed Zechariah: 'Behold a menorah of pure gold.' – the menorah represents the people of Israel. Its base represents the 'nasi – the patriarch; its stem – the head of its courts; the cups which hold the oil – its sages; the menorah's calyxes – their students; and its petals – the children who study Torah."

In this midrash, the menorah represents not God's divine providential light, but rather the light which the people of Israel bring to the world when they study and live by the Torah. The people, who assumed conventionally that God is the source of all light, needed to be made aware of their true role. They, too, serve as agents of God's light in the world.

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## Free Lunches?

*Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, CY Faculty*

**Text: Bamidbar 11:4-6**

*(4) The riffraff in their midst felt gluttonous craving; and the Israelites, too, again wept and said, "Who will feed us meat?! (5) We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic. (6) Now our throats are dry, There is nothing except the Manna to look to!"*

- As the Israelites begin traveling (they have left Mount Sinai after spending a year there) they complain about food, despite having Manna. Why do you think that their complaints are about food? What role does food play in national and personal memory?
- Why do you think that they are reminiscing about fish and vegetables when they complain about the lack of meat?
- What is the difficulty in their claim of "free food" in Egypt? Why do you think that they do not speak of the Manna as being "free food"?

**Commentary: Rashi Bamidbar 11:5**

*[We remember the fish that] we used to eat free in Egypt – If you say that they meant that the Egyptians gave them fish for free, does it not state (Exodus 5:18): [Go and work] for there shall no straw be given you"? Now, if they did not give them straw for free, would they have given them fish for free?! – What then is the meaning of the word "free"? It means: free from the Mitzvot (commandments).*

- Why does Rashi not believe that the food was free?
- What does "free" mean according to Rashi? In the eyes of the people, what was the cost of the free food from God?
- According to this reading, how would you describe the crisis the Israelites were experiencing? Why do you think that it expressed itself through food?

**Commentary Ramban Bamidbar 11:5**

*...By its simple meaning: The Egyptian fishermen would enslave them to pull up the fish caught in the nets, and they would give them of the fish, as is the custom of fishermen... or they were the king's workers... and they would be given... of the king's ration small fish that are considered worthless in Egypt.*

- What is the narrative that Ramban gives to the "free food" that the Israelites seem to remember?
- What might happen to an event when it moves from historic recounting to a memory?

- Ramban opens by stating “by its simple meaning”. Why? (Hint: Which of these commentators was aware of the other?)