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בס"ד

Parashat Beha'alotekha Part I

1. Numbers 8

Parashat Beha'alotekha begins with instructions G-d gives Moses to transmit to Aaron regarding the latter's kindling the lights of the lampstand in the Tent of Meeting (Num. 8:1-4). These instructions had been mentioned twice previously (Exod. 27:20-21; Lev. 24:1-4),* but here Aaron's fulfillment of this high priestly responsibility is depicted for the first time. The reason it is mentioned at this point appears to be the same reason that the preceding verse – the final verse of Numbers 7 – portrayed the ongoing situation of G-d communicating with Moses from the Holy of Holies. After the chieftains concluded their altar dedication ceremonies (the description of which extended to the penultimate verse of the previous chapter), the Tabernacle dedication ceremonies were completed and the Torah presented a vision of a fully functioning sanctuary with the main personages fulfilling their roles. Harking back to the instructional passages in Exodus with fulfillment of key functions completes the narratives of those topics.

As we noted in our comments on the last verse of the previous *parasha*, the description of Moses receiving prophecy in the Tabernacle employs key parallel phrases from the opening chapter of Tabernacle instructions. Similarly, in the case of kindling the lamps the Torah adds a verse that describes the structure of the lampstand, something not mentioned with the previous two instances of instructions for kindling, but connecting with that first chapter of Tabernacle instructions.

The next topic is installation of the Levites, the sanctuary servitors, specifically the procedures for their purification (Num. 8:5-22). This passage is not a chronological continuation of the preceding narrative of Tabernacle inauguration, which was a first-month event of the second year. The official selection of the Levites was not carried out until after completion of

the census, which was begun in the second month of the second year (Num. 3–4). Our passage of Levite purification is thus a resumption of the Levite narrative recorded in the earlier chapters of Numbers.

Although the Levites did bear positions of status (see Num. 16:9-10), they did not officiate in the sanctuary but were assistants to the priests. As such, they were not critical to sanctuary service and had not been included in dedication ceremonies. Indeed, they are not mentioned in Leviticus a single time in conjunction with the Tabernacle. (The only mention of them in Leviticus is in chapter 25 concerning laws of the Jubilee and the cities of the Levites.) But subsequent to Tabernacle dedication, even if out of chronological order, Levite purification and installation rites are fittingly narrated in order to keep sanctuary-related subjects together.

Concerning the priests (a small segment of the tribe of Levi), the object of initiation ceremonies was described as קִדְּשׁ (“sanctify” [Exod. 29; Lev. 8]). With the Levites, however, initiation procedures were designed to accomplish טְהַרְהָרָה (“purity”), a step below holiness. The priests ministered at the altar and performed their duties with the holy vessels. The Levites “are not to come close to the holy vessels and the altar” (Num. 18:3), although they carried the dismantled Tabernacle and its furnishings when properly covered by the priests.

The purificatory rituals prescribed for the Levites include the following procedures:

- Sprinkling upon them מֵי הַטָּהָרָה (water of cleansing), apparently the water potion containing red cow ashes (as described in Numbers 19 for one defiled by contact with a corpse) and bearing similar symbolic meaning to the Numbers 19 ritual**
- Shaving all their body hair, akin to the purification rite for a person healed from

sara'at skin disease (Lev. 14:8-9), in both cases symbolizing thoroughgoing renewal and alluding to the commitment to restart life in a new capacity

- Laundering their clothing, generally understood as including bathing their bodies, which represents spiritual cleansing

The concept underlying the selection of the Levites is that when G-d smote the Egyptian firstborn He took the Israelite firstborn as His (Num. 8:16-18). That was only right, even if impractical to translate into reality. G-d then provided for the redemption of the firstborn with the exchange of the Levites for them. Thus, the Israelites present the Levites to G-d as an “offering” in place of their firstborn. Accordingly, certain standard rituals associated with a sacrifice were enacted. The Israelites perform *semikha* – placing their hands upon the Levites, obviously by means of representatives – thereby officially designating them for the purpose. Aaron lifts and “waves” the Levites, presenting them as an offering before G-d. The Levites, for their part, make *semikha* on their bulls, which are duly sacrificed. G-d, in turn, transfers the Levites to the priests to be sanctuary assistants.

Levites were to enlist at twenty-five years of age (Num. 8:24). Previously we were told that Levite service began at thirty years of age (Num. 4:3). This provides for a five-year apprenticeship period to ensure that sanctuary rites were fully understood and would be executed correctly. (See our *Parashat Bemidbar* study for textual support to this interpretation.) At fifty years of age, Levites retire from “labor,” since it is most appropriate for laborious tasks such as carrying the Tabernacle’s components to be performed by men in the prime of their strength. The older Levites continue to serve in activities that are not physically taxing.

At this point all particulars associated with the Tabernacle’s functioning have been completed and the time to begin traveling to the promised land had arrived. However, before getting to subjects associated with the march, an intervening topic is narrated: G-d’s command to perform the annual Passover sacrifice commemorating the Exodus (Num. 9:1). This command was transmitted בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן (“in the first month”). Since a specific date is not given the phrase בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן is obviously to be translated, “on

the first new moon,” that is, on the first day of the first month. Thus, on the day of Tabernacle assembly G-d reminded Moses of the forthcoming Passover commemoration.

The reason it appears “late,” among passages of the second month, is because as a sacrifice it required the altar (the Passover sacrifice in Egypt had been a necessary exception), and it was appropriate to await the narrative of the completion of altar inauguration before relating about its fulfillment. The narrative of altar inauguration led to discussion of other topics that were related to that section. At the first opportunity, the Passover sacrifice was narrated.

2. Numbers 9a – Concerning the Passover Sacrifice

The first few verses of chapter 9 relate that G-d instructed Moses that the Israelites are to fulfill the Passover sacrifice in its right time according to all its regulations, and they complied (Num. 9:1-5). Why were these instructions necessary considering that there already was a command (Exod. 12:24) to observe the Passover yearly? Ibn Ezra answers that it was to prevent a misunderstanding. The original command, transmitted in Egypt, was given with the stipulation, “And when you enter the land...you shall observe this service” (Exod. 12:25). Thus, it might have been thought that the annual performance of the Passover sacrifice was to commence only upon entry to the land. Before the golden calf episode it was thought that entry to the land would be during the first year so it was not then necessary to legislate for any later years before entry. Now, in the second year, with the nation still at the foot of Mount Sinai, a specific command was required.

The formulation of this instruction to Moses is the only case in Torah legislation that the body of the command, “The Israelites should fulfill the Passover in its right time” (Num. 9:2), is not introduced with a statement such as “speak to,” or “command,” the Israelites. Thus, it possesses the undertone of a reminder; Moses is told to ensure that the Israelites fulfill their responsibility correctly and in a timely fashion. The lesson the sages attached to this passage, that the laws of each calendrical occasion should be reviewed before the festival, seems to be here implied. In any event, commemoration of the Exodus was so important that it understandably was singled out.

The Sifre assumes that the nation did not perform the Passover sacrifice again during the forty years in the wilderness. But it should be noted that subsequent to the sin of the scouts, which occurred in the second year, very few if any details of goings-on are provided until the fortieth year. And the Torah does not clearly imply that the Passover was not again fulfilled. The Ramban assumes that the lack of details indicates that nothing of particular importance occurred during those thirty-eight years.

The first five verses of the discussion regarding the Passover sacrifice comprise a self-contained subsection highly structured in a celebratory and artistic fashion. The first verse is a superscription while the remaining four verses contain three parts: G-d's instructions (vv. 2-3), Moses' transmission of the message (v. 4) and the Israelites' fulfillment of G-d's instructions (v. 5). G-d's instructions and the Israelites' fulfillment parallel each other thematically, in terms of diction and in the number of words each segment contains, twenty-two. Including the superscription, an overlaid pattern of a chiasm with parallelism is clearly present, covering virtually the whole subsection. The key word that defines the sacrifice – חַפְּסָה (either *hapasah* or *hapesah*, a technical point) – appears three times in the five verses, once in each part. The total number of words for the complete subsection is fifty-one. The numerical value of the word חַפְּסָה is 153, a multiple of the number of words, consistent with Rabbi S. D. Sassoon's "key word" methodology.

The unique significance of the Passover sacrifice is underscored in the following verses. Some men who were ritually defiled due to having had contact with a dead body and accordingly precluded from participating in this rite, remonstrated, "Why should we be lacking by being excluded from presenting Hashem's offering?" (v. 7). Although exempt, they recognized the loss they would bear if they did not directly experience the service. Moses had no answer, but acknowledged their argument and so presented their case to G-d. The reply established the institution of *Pesah Shenit*, a "second Passover" to fulfill this ritual in the following month. Thus, a section of law was added to the Torah in response to a sincere request from members of the public who were not satisfied to be exempt.

The issue was only the offering of the sacrifice; defilement did not affect observance of the attached seven-day festival of *matzot* in its proper time in the first month.

G-d's response also provided a second chance with *Pesah Shenit* to one who was *בְּדֶרֶךְ רְחֹקָה* ("on a distant journey") and could not return on time for the Passover sacrifice (which required presence at the central sanctuary). It is noteworthy that the Torah does not qualify the purpose of the "distant journey" and does not express any criticism of the individual for being away. Contrary to the disposition fostered by some religious philosophies, this regulation recognizes the sphere of ordinary human activity as legitimate even when confronting an important ritual. Of course, one who was not a victim of circumstances but intentionally abstained from the first *Pesah* was excluded from the second chance (*m. Pesah*. 9:1).

There is a question here. How did those who were defiled dare come forth seeking an accommodation? The law of ritual defilement was in place and a defiled individual was prohibited from participating in the sacrifice. The law is the law.

Some addressed this question by finding some legal grounds for the complaint. They interpret "and were not able to perform the *Pesah* on that day" (Num. 9:6) as meaning that just on "that day," positing that the defiled men were scheduled to complete their purification period the evening following the afternoon of the *Pesah* sacrifice. They would thus be able to partake of the sacrificial meal at night with everybody else. Since the sacrifice was specifically performed by groups (Exod. 12:3-4), they thought they should be included (see *b. Sukkah* 25b; *Targum Jonathan*). However, this surely appears midrashic.

The boldness of the request and the fact that the men were accommodated provides an important precedent. Even when confronting legally established religious rituals, a sincere individual is within his rights to use his judgment and respectfully appeal to the relevant authority when he feels there might be a better approach for addressing the situation at hand. When the argument is compelling the authority is expected to take the matter up for reconsideration. In this case Moses took the question to G-d. In the absence of

prophetic communication the authorities are expected to reconsider the matter patiently and fairly. The argument of Zelophehad's daughters (Num. 27:1-11) and the related one of the tribe of Manasseh (Num. 36) also manifest this principle.

In the case of the Passover sacrifice, the individuals who sought accommodation were defiled from corpse contamination, but the sages understood the dispensation given them to apply to all impurities.

Our passage appears to have been the inspiration for Hezekiah's mandating a national celebration of *Pesah* in the second month when, upon cleansing the temple and the nation, there was no time for appropriate purification during the first month (2 Chr. 30). The Talmud, however, explains the dispensation of our passage as applying only to individuals. If the majority of the nation was defiled due to corpse-contact, the defilement is ignored for the purpose of the *Pesah* sacrifice and it is offered in its regular time. Various interpretations of the Hezekiah case are proffered (*b. Sanh.* 12).

Most laws pertaining to the Passover sacrifice were recorded in Exodus 12. That chapter contains laws for both the one-time procedures for the offering while the nation was still in Egypt (פֶּסַח מִצְרַיִם) as well as the regulations governing its future observance (פֶּסַח לְדוֹרוֹת), with significant differences between them. According to Ibn Ezra (on Exod. 12:50) a portion of the Exodus 12 account was recorded where it is to complete presentation of the subject there, but actually “belonged” to our Numbers passage. The divine communication that transmitted our Numbers passage was the source for those Exodus regulations, and “there is no early or late concerning Torah passages.” Isaac Sassoon demonstrates that a close reading of Exodus 12:43-50, verses that deal with regulations relevant to the future Passover sacrifice, clearly points to that segment having been commanded subsequent to the Exodus (see *Destination Torah* pp. 62-64).

3. Chapter 9b – Traveling

Upon conclusion of the Passover section the Torah introduces the initiation of the journey to the promised land with a description of the most important aspect of how Israel traveled on its journey. From the day the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered it by day

and the appearance of fire by night. This imagery may be thought of as a fire within a cloud, with the fire invisible in daylight but shining through at night, eclipsing the cloud. When the cloud lifted, Israel embarked; where it settled they encamped. Israel followed the divine signal wherever it led them (Num. 9:15-23). This passage is a fuller version of the one that closed the book of Exodus (Exod. 40:34-38). It is presented from the perspective of many years later, as it states that the cloud sometimes lingered for a month, sometimes for a year. It is testimony describing a nation that, despite its many and great failings and setbacks, after all was said and done, ultimately followed G-d though the wilderness. It is reminiscent of His words, “I remember to your favor the affection of your youth, your love as a bride – how you followed Me in the wilderness, in a land not sown” (Jer. 2:2).

As a celebratory account this passage contains a number of poetic devices, including recurrent rhythmic phrases with repetitive detail and a variety of numerical devices. After elaborating the central theme that Israel did not embark until the cloud lifted, verses 21-22 intensify the feeling by employing a slowly increasing progression of time units: “Sometimes...evening to morning and the cloud lifted in the morning and they traveled, or day and night and the cloud lifted and they traveled, or two days, a month, a year...when it [the cloud] lifted they would travel.”

The passage comprises 146 words, the numerical value of the passage's key word יָסַע (“they traveled”). This verb is attested many times in the passage, seven times in the spelling יָסַע (usually vocalized יָסַע but sometimes יָסַע) and twice in the form of יָסַעוּ. (In such a covenantal passage we wonder what the explanation may be of there being seven attestations or nine but not eight.)

The word הַמִּשְׁכָּן (“the Tabernacle”) is also attested seven times in this passage while other forms of the -שׁ-ן-כ (“dwell”) root associated with the cloud appear three times. The phrase עַל פִּי ה' (“by the mouth of Hashem”), which describes the traveling as following Hashem's signal, also appears seven times. These totals surely require an explanation.

Except for several brief travel-related passages in chapter 10, the narrative concerning the sanctuary

begun in Exodus 25 is now completed. Thus, just as the book of Exodus, which in its latter portion was focused on the Tabernacle, concludes with a depiction of Israel's traveling with G-d leading the way, so does our section of the book of Numbers, containing the final phase of Tabernacle-related instructions, virtually conclude. The parallel passages form a type of bookends around the book of Leviticus, highlighting the lawgiving that was transmitted in the Tent of Meeting.

Endnotes

* See our study on *Parashat Tesaveh Part I* for a discussion on why instructions for kindling the lampstand were placed in Exodus 27.

** See our study on Numbers 19, *Parashat Huqqat Part I*.

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