

Parashat Beha'alotcha: You Have Wings of Spirit

Dear Friends,

In this week's parasha, Beha'alotcha, Bnei Yisrael finally begin their journey to the Promised Land. Fourteen months have passed since the Exodus from Egypt, and so far there were only the spiritual preparations for the journey. Two main things happened during this time: they received the Torah, and they built the Tabernacle (the Mishkan).

Everyone needs these two things on their life's journey - a Torah and a Mishkan.

The Torah signifies the vision/destination - the Promised Land - and the golden rules for the voyage - how to be a human being on the arduous journey. The Mishkan is the inner compass which leads them on their path every given moment.

Notice that there is a destination, there are rules, and there is a compass, but there is no map!

There are no maps because all paths lead to the Promised Land. There are longer paths and shorter ones, direct paths and circuitous ones. There are no mistakes. It is possible to draw nearer to a destination or to wander further away, but even the latter is simply a twist on the path to the destination.

Until a certain point in our lives, the path appears horizontal - from one specific place in time and space to another. In the dimension of time, this is a journey from infancy, through childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and all the way to old age. The journey in the dimension of space is from our parents' home to our own - with a family, two cars, and a dog. On the way, we acquire education, profession, money, and status.

The horizontal journey to the Promised Land is called all around the world, "the American dream". It is all about having and doing: "So, what do you do in life?" And what have you succeeded in accumulating (what kind of car do you drive, is

your house mortgage free, and how does your financial situation compare to others'?).

The horizontal journey of having and doing is very important!!! Parashat Beha'alotcha tells us what happens when a person is lacking: **“and then the Israelites wept and said, “If only we had meat to eat! We remember the fish that we used to eat free in Egypt, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic.”** (Bamidbar 11:4-5)

The distinguished American-Jewish psychologist, Abraham Maslow, taught us the hierarchy of needs which echoes the teachings of Our Sages: **“If there is no flour, there is no Torah... One whose wisdom (Torah) is greater than his deeds (flour, profession), what is he comparable to? To a tree with many branches but few roots; comes a storm and uproots it, and turns it on its face.”** (Masechet Avot 3:17)

But then, at a certain point on our life's journey - and it varies from person to person - the horizontal journey in time and space loses its grip on us. Not that it ever ends - we always need food - but it becomes secondary. And then the vertical journey takes precedence.

The word for “vertical” in Hebrew - anochi - also means “I” in biblical Hebrew, and it appears in the first commandment: **“I (Anochi) am the Lord your God, who took you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery, you will have no other gods before Me.”** (Sh'mot 20:2)

This first commandment that Bnei Yisrael receive as part of the preparation for their journey reminds them - i.e. us - that a mysterious power motivates the horizontal journey from the house of slavery to the Promised Land. Rabbi Kook wrote a poem about this which has recently become one of the most popular songs in the current spiritual genre: **“Human, rise, rise up; because you have tremendous power; you have wings of wind (spirit), wings of mighty eagles. Do not deny them, lest they deny you. Seek them, and they will find you immediately.”** (Orot Hakodesh 1:64)

By nature, a person is not meant to discover this hidden power at the beginning of the journey.

When we are young, the Torah says, **“...you say to yourselves, “My own power and the might of my own hand have won this wealth for me”** (D'varim 8:17) - I did it! I got it! I built it, with my own hands! Me! Me! It's all about me!

It is very important that a person feels this way at the early stages of his or her life. It is important to recognize our power, our abilities, our ego, our selves.

But then comes the next parasha of the Torah, Parashat Sh'lach Lecha, in which Bnei Yisrael arrive at the boundaries of the Promised Land. They send twelve scouts to tour the Land. Forty days later they return with the abundance of the Land in their bags to show everyone. Ten of them say **"We cannot attack that people, for it is stronger than we."** (Bamidbar 13:31)

They have found the boundaries of "My own power and the might of my own hands"!

Only at a certain age are we ready to hear the other voice, the voice of Yehoshua Bin-Nun and Calev Ben Yefuneh - the minority opinion among the scouts, who said **"The land that we traversed and scouted is an exceedingly good land. If the LORD is pleased with us, He will bring us into that land, a land that flows with milk and honey, and give it to us;"** (Bamidbar 14:7-8)

Yehoshua Bin-Nun and Calev Ben Yefuneh remind us that our real power is not physical. Neither is it a product of our education or the size of our car or stated in our monthly bank statement.

Not that all these things are not important! They are! Good education, sound physical strength, the ability to support ourselves financially and not be a burden on society, are all vital. But our true power lies elsewhere - in the wings of the spirit which bring us from the border of the Promised Land into it.

According to the Torah, we are ready for this realization somewhere around our fortieth birthday. It can happen earlier or later. Spiritually it is even dangerous to hasten the vertical journey: **"I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem...: Do not wake or rouse Love until it please!"** (Song of Songs 2:7)

How will we know when we are ready? How will we know when the time has come for the vertical journey?

The answer to this question is given in this week's parasha through a beautiful metaphor: **"On the day that the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle...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. At a command of the LORD the Israelites broke camp, and at the command of the LORD they made camp: they remained encamped as long as the cloud stayed over the Tabernacle...Whether it was**

two days or a month or a year—however long the cloud lingered over the Tabernacle—the Israelites remained encamped and did not set out; only when it lifted did they break camp. On a sign from the LORD they made camp and on a sign from the LORD they broke camp.” (Bamidbar 9:17-23)

In other words, we will know when it is time to continue on the journey - both the horizontal and the vertical - when our cloud, our inner compass, lets us know. We will know when we know, and not a moment before.

So we can relax! All paths lead to the Promised Land, and there is no predetermined schedule. The journey of our lives is not really in our hands.

But don't tell anyone under the age of forty.

Bon Voyage and Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha