D'var Torah B'ha'alotcha June 22, 2024

By Reva Kasman

Shabbat Shalom. I'm Reva Kasman.

I've been a member of Minyan Ma'or for about two years now. In my adult life, I've been a member of 6 different shul communities, not all lay-led, but even those that weren't had ample opportunities for congregants to daven, leyn, and otherwise take on the ritual roles needed to run services. Believe me, when you show up in Grand Rapids, Michigan and know how to chant Torah, they are more than glad to include you in the roster! And in many ways, taking on these tasks has brought me joy and satisfaction. There's a part of me that loves these traditional rituals and feels gratitude at having learned the necessary skills to contribute in this manner, particularly as somebody who did not grow up in a fully egalitarian congregation.

But this is not the only part inside of me. At different times in my life, in response to personal experiences, community dynamics, or world events, parts of me are not always excited to do things at shul, or not in a particularly spiritual frame of mind. Sometimes this means that I sign up less or decline certain volunteer "opportunities." But more often than not, it means that I *am* still doing these jobs, and because a part of me is unfailingly conscientious, I'm probably doing them well, and none of my internal conflict will be evident on the outside to anyone else in the room. Which leads me to this week's parsha.

Beha'alotcha is quite packed with dramatic and highly charged content, none of which will be the main topic of my d'var. I actually want to focus on the opening p'sukim, which appear pretty innocuous. Numbers Chapter 8 begins with these relatively mundane sentences:

"Hashem spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to Aaron and say to him: "When you light the lamps, the seven lamps shall cast their light toward the face of the menorah." Aaron did so; he lit the lamps toward the face of the menorah, as the Lord had commanded Moses."

There is really no reason to linger on these lines. But of course the rabbis do linger, and they attempt to read into Aaron's experience. The Vilna Gaon's version is described in many sources, including the Etz Chayim chumash, but I'll share the words of Rabbi Eve Posner. She writes, "The Vilna Gaon…interprets this text to mean, "Day after day, year after year, Aaron's attitude never changed. His work never became routine or boring. He approached each day with the same sense of reverence he brought to his first day" [finding] joy in the spiritual elevation of performing this task for G-d and his community."

This is quite a bold claim, to presume that Aaron never wavered in his delight and commitment at performing his daily ritual tasks. We know that Aaron's life was complicated and punctuated by incidents of strife and immense tragedy. And even without these stories, Aaron was human. Humans get bored. Humans get frustrated. Of course, it is possible that the Vilna Gaon's interpretation might be true, and we are simply intended to find in this reading an inspiring call to appreciate the value of the many repeated practices which our tradition tells us to perform - daily, monthly, or yearly without change, regardless of our state of mind or circumstances.

Naturally, this is not the only interpretation of the text. In her June 2023 Shabbat sermon focused on loneliness, Rabbi Sharon Brous of IKAR shares a version stemming from Rashi. Rabbi Brous recounts, "The rabbis ask why it is that the parsha starts this way?...Rashi…uses this opportunity not only to think about Aaron's priestly role, but to invite us to dive deeper into Aaron's inner state, to gaze upon Aaron's broken heart. [Deriving ideas from Midrash Tanchuma, Rashi says that] Aaron witnessed how all the other tribes were given a role during the building of the mishkan, and it broke his heart. He felt excluded, he felt alienated and

worthless. And so G-d consoles Aaron, saying 'Don't worry, don't fear, you have something great in you too, and the thing in you will heal you and it will heal them, [the people of Israel]." The rabbis even suggest that Aaron's assigned task is not only important, but may even be more important than [the tasks assigned to all the other tribes.]"

In some ways this interpretation is more appealing than the previous one because it paints Aaron with a more relatable and emotional human brush, suggesting that Aaron might feel hurt or jealous or even heartbroken when he is seemingly left out by G-d. And his wounded pride is repaired when he realizes that actually he wasn't being overlooked, that in fact G-d was saving the very best, most important and special job of lighting the menorah just for him.

But in all honesty, that version doesn't resonate with me that much more than the first one. It's still an overly simplistic portrayal of someone's internal state, resolved with an inspirational takeaway message about a person's fulfillment from performing the routines of holy service. It reminds me a lot of another line that bothers me every week in the Shabbat Shacharit Amidah: "Yismach Moshe b'matnat chelko - Moses rejoiced at the giving of his destiny." Really? In whose version of the Torah? After initially trying to literally run away and hide from G-d's calling, Moses reluctantly takes on this burden. He maintains his leadership role until his death, but even in today's parsha, we witness the psychological rollercoaster that Moshe is constantly riding. Chapter 11 recounts Moshe crying out to G-d, "Why have You dealt ill with your servant, and why have I not enjoyed Your favor? …If You would deal thus with me, kill me rather, I beg You, and let me see no more of my wretchedness! " It does not really seem to fit the description "Yismach Moshe b'matnat chelko."

Now, it is not my intention to cast doubt on the devotion of either Aaron or Moses. It's easy for me to believe that they each experienced moments of joy and pride and profound awe at the weight of doing their Divinely-commanded tasks. I just don't believe that this is *all* that they ever felt, all of the time. And I think that we do a disservice when we (and the rabbis) try to characterize "goodness" and "a good religious person or leader" with this type of narrow trope. A classic example of this occurs every year at our Pesach seders, when we describe the Four Sons (or Four Children), and by extension each of us, as fitting into the discrete categories of "wise" "wicked", "simple", and "the one who does not yet know how to ask". I know at my own family seder this usually leads to good-natured teasing, particularly around who might be the "wicked child." But joking aside, the implication seems clear - the "wise" child is the "best" child and everyone else is, in some ways, less than.

But as "The Night of Questions" Haggadah says, "At different points in our lives, each of us may have taken on the various characteristics of all of these children – eager, hostile, passive, bewildered. We have each asked the cleverest of questions, we have challenged provocatively, we have simply wanted to know the answer, we have felt too ashamed to speak." And so it's problematic if the only time we feel that our voice is valued at the seder table, or in front of our community, is when we appear to be "wise".

When we set such idealized standards - Aaron is "good" because he is unwaveringly sincere in his ritual duty; or Moses is praiseworthy because he rejoices at his role even when he's anguished - we convey the message that when you are conflicted about Judaism or Jewish practice, something is wrong with you. When your kavanah is not at full capacity, or maybe on some days not even at minimum capacity, this is something that needs to be hidden. It might not be our intention, but we can make people feel that when you have parts inside of you that are doubting, confused, bored or angry, especially about an aspect of Jewish practice or community, that maybe this isn't the time to be visible. And that's a tragic lesson to impart, particularly to young people, because life is complicated, and emotions are messy but also an integral piece of what makes us human, and we can't help but bring all of that to our religious experience.

I think that we implicitly know that we need to make space for a person's internal conflict when we think about them going through traumatic life events, like a loved one's death, or a medical crisis. But I believe we need to be just as expansive when we consider how we talk about Judaism's ideals for a person's mindset regarding faith and practice. There should not be an incongruity between identifying with one of the three "not-wise" children and performing Jewish rituals. When I have grappled with these feelings, I know that being told a midrash about the unfailing reverence of a historical or biblical figure would have felt like a tone-deaf response.

When people sense that they need to hide while struggling with belief and observance, they often disappear from the community. And if they leave, they don't always return, and that's an enormous loss. So let's make sure that we're consistent and proactive about conveying a Jewish message that says with compassion, "All of these things can be talked about, in our shuls and our youth groups and our classrooms. No matter what you are feeling or questioning, your presence - and your service - are valued here."

Shabbat Shalom.