

Sermon Beha'alotecha 20 "Misguided Assertiveness"

Good Shabbos, Shabbat shalom. First, I'd like to acknowledge that this week's sermon is sponsored by Rivkah Blutstein and Judah Bellin, in honor of me (thank you!) and the entire Mekor community, as they prepare for their move to Bala Cynwyd at the end of the month. Thank you; we are very sad that you are leaving us – best of luck in Bala – and we will miss you dearly!

As we've discussed recently, the Book of Bamidbar revolves around the importance of balancing the individual Jew and the Jewish nation. Parshat Beha'alotecha takes this theme the next step further in this process. It begins with the mitzvah of lighting the menorah in the mishkan. Rashi teaches based on the gemara in Mesechet Shabbat 21a that one of the most important elements of this mitzvah is that although we help to ignite the wick, the candle must light up and burn on its own. Many commentators, such as Harav Moshe Feinstein in Darash Moshe, view this process as a symbol for the education of our children. We teach them not only information, but also how to make decisions. And they should be under our tutelage until the point when they are capable to make decisions on their own. We must teach them while they are young, but they must not be tethered to us.

Nonetheless, we also know that with independence comes a multitude of pitfalls. That's why our Parsha continues the narrative by describing how the Jewish people faltered on their path to independence. Moshe declares that he doesn't wish to be *Haomein et hayoneik, like a mother nursing her children*. The Jewish people were dependent on him and on the manna from heaven, which the midrash compares to mother's milk. However, the Jews who requested meat, which as we know is the antithesis of milk and can't be mixed with it -- many of those people died while still eating the meat, because they used their independence to fulfill their own self-centered desires. And that is why their burial place is called *Kivrot Hataava - the cemetery of gluttony*.

Another example of misguided assertiveness is the lashon hara spoken by Miriam at the end of the Parsha. The Rambam explains that she was well-meaning and caused no harm, but she was punished anyway, perhaps as we have previously explained, for trying to impose her own perspective on the special relationship God established with Moshe regarding his prophecy. And some say that her downfall was that she spoke about a topic that is particularly relevant today – she commented on Tzipora's race. *Ki Isha Kushit lakach* – that Moshe married Tzipora, who is specifically identified as a Kushite or an Ethiopian woman.

It's possible to understand this to mean that when we speak, when we express ourselves as individuals, we must be sensitive to the feelings of everyone around us.

We as Jews have been persecuted for millennia, and so we should be particularly sensitive to current events and to racism in our midst. We need not agree with all the politics and rhetoric surrounding these complex issues. But we must be empathic with the pain and suffering endured by other people who are targets of bigotry. Only in that way can we fulfill our potential both as individuals and as a Jewish nation. Shabbat shalom.